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A WOMAN'S MANEUVER; OR, PURSE, NOT HEART.

BY LILLIAN LOVEJOY,

AUTHOR OF "SINNED AGAINST," "HONOR BOUND," "A STRANGE MARRIAGE," ETC., ETC.



"YOU SEEM TO HAVE HAD SOME CAPITAL SPORT."

A Woman's Maneuver; OR, PURSE, NOT HEART.

BY LILLIAN LOVEJOY,
AUTHOR OF "A POINT OF HONOR," "TEMPTED
THROUGH LOVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WAITING BY THE RIVER.

"It's really too bad of him; here have I been waiting fully twenty minutes, and he has failed me," said a girl just dawning into womanhood, as she stood on the bank of a little stream which wound itself along the valley of the Ramapo hills.

There was a charm in her every look, and a grace that bespoke refinement, as she gazed meditatively into the crystal water glistening at her feet.

She was dressed in a simple but becoming style, which displayed her figure to great advantage; a soft gray shade of cashmere with snowy cuffs and collar, and a dainty little crimson knot at her throat.

Her hair, of a rich golden brown, was gathered in a knot at the back of her dainty little head, which was uncovered and allowed the rays of the setting sun to nestle lovingly on it, and to play with varying shades of color among her tresses, casting quite an aureole around her.

She was about eighteen. Her small, full red lips were slightly parted, exposing a set of regular teeth as white as pearls.

She had taken off her hat to allow the soft evening breeze to cool her flushed face, for she had hurried to the trysting-place afraid of being too late.

Above, a lark soared, chanting its vesper hymn of praise, and the girl's sweet, thrilling notes joined those of the little warbler, as she sung—

"Nobody knows as I know, as I know, as I know,
How fondly my heart can beat with a lover at my feet."

The trees upon the bank formed an impenetrable screen, and concealed her from the casual gaze of any passer-by.

Stooping, she picked up some pebbles and threw them into the stream, watching eagerly for the eddies as, with ever-widening circles, they reached the bank.

"He will come," she murmured. "I know I shall get my wish, for the river always speaks the truth."

She was not aware that a pair of dark eyes were watching her, their owner being concealed from view by a mass of intervening foliage, or she would not have felt so much at her ease.

While he watched, whether from design or passing curiosity to feast his eyes upon her beauty, quick footsteps attracted her attention and made her give vent to a subdued cry of joy.

In another moment she was folded in the arms of Oswald Wyncott, and her blushing face was upturned to his to receive quite a shower of kisses upon her brow, eyes, and lips, as he murmured, "My darling Jessie, do not chide me for a truant. My uncle detained me over the wine, or I should not have been behind time."

"Now that you are here, dear Oswald, I take no count of time, either past or present; but you look worried. Has anything unpleasant happened?"

"No, my darling, except that my uncle has been treating me to one of his usual lectures about settling in life, and of choosing a wife from among quite a list of eligibles. I cannot understand why he has been so stern with me of late."

"Perhaps he has heard of our meetings," she said, with a little sigh. "Ah, me! I believe in the old saying, 'that the course of true love never did run smooth.'"

"But it shall in our case, darling. What

care I for any inheritance he may leave me? I am young, and flatter myself that I have some talents, which will enable me to make my way in the world, with you by side to cheer and aid me."

"I do not wish you to make such a sacrifice for my sake, dear Oswald. Perhaps if your uncle knew the truth he would not be angry with us. Why do you not ask your brother Bertram to mediate for you?"

"I must be frank with you, Jessie; I cannot trust Bertram, and have kept our love a secret from him."

"Why?—he speaks kindly to me when we meet," and, looking down with a blush, added: "You will not be angry, he—"

"Has he dared to speak to you of love?" he asked, passionately, while his dark eyes flashed and his brow darkened.

"He only said he liked me very much, and wanted me to meet him. Do not think unkindly of him, Oswald; he believes me free, and as you wish our engagement to be kept secret, I dared not undeceive him."

"He is a traitor!" he said bitterly, "and has been poisoning my uncle's mind against me; you do not know him as I do, or you would avoid him. If he knew our secret he would make use of it to ruin me."

"What is to be done?" she asked, looking into his face tenderly. "I will be guided entirely by you, and wait until difficulties can be smoothed away."

"You are an angel, Jessie," he said, "and fit to be the wife of an emperor. I am sure my uncle would love you if he only knew you."

"I do not wish you to be rash," she said, "and offend him; to drag you down to comparative poverty would be a sorry recompense for having bestowed your love upon me. I have felt its cruel stings, and even now my father and I are not free from its vexations. You have a bright future before you, Oswald; we are both young, and can afford to wait; neither would I like to trust my father to the care of strangers."

"We could all live together," he said, "and be so happy."

"You do not know my father, dear Oswald. He is the best of men, but his mania about finding a rich seam of coal upon his land makes him very irritable and trying; my great love for him alone helps me to bear with him."

"He may yet succeed, Jessie."

"He has spent all his fortune," she replied, sadly, "and has no means to continue the search. I have given up all hope myself, and wish he would do the same before we are completely impoverished."

"I would aid him were it in my power, dearest," he said, "and claim as my reward his best treasure—yourself."

They spent some further time in love's sweet dream, perfectly oblivious of the presence of Bertram Wyncott, who had been listening to all that passed between the lovers.

"So, so!" he muttered; "this accounts for her rejection of my advances! Not that I ever thought of making a penniless girl my wife. My uncle shall know of this latest freak of my mad-brained brother, which will about settle him in his estimation; as he has robbed me of her, I shall have my revenge. I have hated him since our boyhood. He stole my father's love, and wormed his way into our uncle's affection; but I have thwarted him in the latter, and now I will not spare him; but he shall never know who is his enemy, although he may suspect me as much as he likes."

The brothers were the offspring of different mothers, both of whom, together with the father, were dead, leaving them to the care of a rich bachelor uncle, Charles Dinton by name.

The sun went down in splendor behind the hills, and the gray shadows of night stole o'er the earth ere the lovers parted, full of courage and hope, little dreaming that their paradise was to be invaded by a serpent, full of the venom of hatred, envy and jealousy.

CHAPTER II.

ANGLING.

DINTON HALL was picturesquely situated on the brow of a hill, standing sentinel-like, looking down upon the valley, with its wealth of orchards and golden grain, which rustled in the breeze, to the accompaniment of the mountain brook, as it rushed over rocks and other natural barriers.

It was the finest and most imposing country residence for miles around, and was quite celebrated as such.

The morning following the meeting of Jessie and Oswald, Mr. Dinton was seated in his library, with anything but a pleased expression on his face as he glanced at the contents of a letter which he held in his hand.

Though well-stricken in years he still possessed a vigorous frame, and his eyes were bright and full of intelligence.

His mouth bespoke a firmness and decision of character arguing ill for those who thwarted his wishes or disobeyed his commands.

Yet, although stern, he possessed a kind heart, and was never known to press hardly on the many indebted to him for help willingly given in time of need.

He had ambitious notions about his nephews, more especially about Oswald, for whom he had projected a brilliant marriage and a political career, as he had the highest opinion of his talents.

"Good-morning, Dinton, my boy," said a cheery voice. "You see I am using the privilege of an old friend in looking you up un-awares."

"My dear general, you are just the man I wish to see of all others! Just read that"—tossing the letter over to him. "That favorite of yours is running his head into a pretty noose. Really, the responsibility is getting too much for an old fellow like me, who wants to settle down and not be bothered by the vagaries of a mad-brained youth. Thank Heaven, Bertram runs straight enough! Jove, I'll marry, and disappoint the pair of them!"

While his friend was rattling on in this petulant style, General Pringle perused the letter.

"You are never going to notice such a contemptible thing as that? The writer hasn't the courage to put his name to it."

"I dare say it's true enough, though," growled the other. "There's never smoke without a little fire."

"Oswald is a manly, honest fellow, and is sure to do you credit. Granted that he has conceived an affection for this lady—he is too proud to bestow his love on any woman who is *not* a lady—isn't it natural at his age?"

"Not at all," blurted out Mr. Dinton. "Marriage, indeed! I have had to do without the luxury of a wife, although I could have had a score or more. What business has Oswald to think of supporting some extravagant hussy on next to nothing? Humph! my house would be overrun with squalling brats, who would insist upon making me go down on my hands and knees to give them something to ride on!"

So terrible a picture of an invasion in futuro quite nonplused the old gentleman, who threw himself back in his chair and frowned and scowled at imaginary grand-nieces and nephews.

The general laughed heartily, and said:

"Depend on't, my boy, when the youngsters do marry they would like separate establishments, and not to all dwell together like a happy family. Besides, if any mischief has been done, you are alone to blame."

"Confound it, Pringle! what do you mean? Do you take me for a lunatic? My fault, indeed! What have I done?"—this with a defiant snort.

"It's what you haven't done, Dinton, I am referring to."

"Please explain."

"You keep the lads mewed up here without society, and the consequence is that they fall in love, or think they do, with the first pretty

milkmaid they run across. Why don't you fill the house with young people, particularly of the fair sex, and give the lads a chance of making a choice that would receive your approval?"

"By Jove, Pringle, you are a veritable Solomon, and I'll follow your advice; but that young rascal sha'n't escape a lecture. I'll have him in, and we'll both give it him in a style he won't soon forget."

"No, thank you, Dinton. If you wish Oswald to listen to your advice, don't let a third party be present, or humiliate his pride unnecessarily. Such a course would drive him into open rebellion. I will take a fishing-rod, and go down to the river till lunch."

When the general had left, Mr. Dinton sent for Oswald, who was not in the best frame of mind to listen patiently to a lecture, for he had just had a stormy interview with his brother Bertram, thus increasing their enmity.

"You have sent, for me, sir?"

"Of course I have! Just read that letter. I trust to your honor as a gentleman to tell me the truth."

Oswald turned pale as he glanced o'er the venomous epistle, which meant the beginning of misery for himself and Jessie.

"Well, sir, what have you to say?" his uncle asked, somewhat eagerly.

"That it is true; I love Miss Paget, and have promised to make her my wife; but not without your consent, uncle."

"That you will never get, then; I would rather you'd marry a milkmaid."

"Sir, I beg you will not speak so disparagingly of a lady whom I respect and love."

"Respect! fiddlesticks! Do you know that her father is a confirmed lunatic, who has ruined himself by sheer obstinacy? and, although nothing better than a pauper, has dared to insult me because I offered to buy his land."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir; but Jessie cannot be held responsible for what her father has done. We do not wish to marry until I am in a position to keep her in comfort. Do not be angry, uncle; if you only knew her you would love her."

"Mere sentiment—bosh! You must relinquish all idea of marrying Miss Paget; I have other views regarding your future, and expect you will, in your own interest, if not out of respect for my wishes, aid and not thwart me. Remember, my will is inflexible, and that I can be stern and unyielding if you disobey. You will find General Pringle down at the river; he wishes to see you."

"Poor boy," his uncle soliloquized, "I have always loved him, and would be sorry to have to treat him harshly; but I cannot allow my substance to be wasted on such an old fool as Paget, who would ruin a millionaire with his whims. I'll follow Pringle's advice, and write my invitations to-day."

Meanwhile, General Pringle had wandered down to the river side to kill time, and to get away from a scene of unpleasantness.

He was successful in catching several fine trout, which lay in his basket, their silvery scales bright with the rays of a mid-day sun.

"I am sure I beg your pardon, sir," said a sweet, girlish voice. "I am afraid I have overturned your basket,"—stooping down to remedy the accident, with a rosy blush on her fair young face.

He was fairly spellbound with silent admiration of the lovely vision which had burst upon him so suddenly.

"Pray do not mention it," he said, at last; "it was my fault for having obstructed the footpath."

"And I was very clumsy," she said, with a merry laugh, quite at her ease in the presence of such a genial old gentleman, who wore one of the most benign smiles she had ever had the good fortune to see. "You seem to have had some capital sport this morning."

"I am indeed fortunate," he said, with a significant smile; "and am trying to replenish my friend Dinton's larder."

"I think you have succeeded already," she said, with an arch smile. "I am a bit of an angler myself."

Offering her his rod, he said, gallantly:

"Would you favor me by trying your luck? Surely no fish could resist your skill, when backed up by so much beauty."

She blushed prettily, when he hastened to add:

"Pardon the liberty, and forgive me on the score of age; but I am an old soldier, and have a habit of speaking out my thoughts. But I see you have been laying nature under contributions."

"Are they not pretty?" she asked. "And this is a very rare specimen,"—holding up a delicate spiral-leaf fern for his admiration—"will you accept it?"

"I do not wish to deprive you of it, but will accept it with pleasure, if you will permit me to give it to a young friend of mine, who is a great judge of such things—Mr. Oswald Wyncott."

"Pray do," she replied, with animation; "and let me add another. I am sure he will like these."

"Many thanks; but I do not know the name of the fair donor."

"Miss Paget," she replied.

"And mine is General Pringle; and I hope this will not be the last time I shall have the pleasure of meeting Miss Paget."

"You are very kind; but my father's state of health does not permit us visiting or receiving visits. I spend most of my time here and in the woods."

"A veritable wood nymph," he thought. "I only wish I was twenty years younger to gather such a sweet flower, and treasure it as my very own."

Aloud he said, "I shall haunt these beautiful solitudes, Miss Paget, when I visit Dinton Hall. But will you not take the rod for a few minutes?"

"I thank you very much, but I cannot stay now, as my father will be waiting lunch, and he never likes to be alone, so pray excuse me. I shall be pleased to meet you again, and accept your kind offer then."

And saying which she bowed, and offered her pretty little hand, with its circlet of diamonds and pearls, that had only been placed there a few days back by her affianced husband, which caught the eye of the general, as he admired the shape and delicacy of the tapering fingers.

A sense of loneliness took possession of him when the sunlight of her presence vanished, and his interest in his favorite amusement ceased.

He was just leaving the spot, when Oswald came up and shook hands with him heartily, saying, "I have been looking everywhere but the right place for you. Allow me to carry your basket, which seems pretty full."

"My dear boy, I am loth to leave a spot where I have seen a charming vision, such a one as would tempt a man to follow her into the middle of that stream."

"You have been highly favored, my dear general, and have the advantage of us natives. But who captivated you?"

"And see," remarked the general, "she actually made me a present of these rare ferns, which I accepted on your behalf."

"They are fine specimens, general; but you have not told me yet to whom we are indebted for the gift."

"To one of the most charming, unaffected, lady-like girls I have ever met. Ah, my boy, I had the advantage of you this morning! Egad, I think I shall enter the lists against all comers, you included!"

"I am very patient, general, but I can't restrain my curiosity much longer."

"I thought I had told you," he said, with a merry twinkle in his eye. "I will now repair the omission, but I tell you frankly that the information will be of little use to you. She is already appropriated by some lucky dog, as I saw for myself by the golden badge on her sweet little finger."

"You seem to have taken in every detail at a glance; but, of course, that is your profession. But what is the name of this fair unknown?"

"Miss Paget."

"What, Jessie, my own sweet wood-violet?"

"Come, come," said the general, "you have got into one scrape already, so don't, please, tumble into another. Your uncle confided a certain matter to me this morning."

"To which I pleaded guilty, and Miss Paget is the lady in question."

"Then, by Jove, you are a lucky fellow; and I quite approve of your choice, and will help you to overcome your uncle's scruples."

Now that Oswald had a willing listener, he did not tire of the one theme—Jessie.

CHAPTER III.

A CURE FOR TRUE LOVE.

AFTER luncheon Mr. Dinton called Bertram aside, saying:

"Join me in the library; I wish you to assist me in writing invitations."

"Certainly, sir," he replied, respectfully; but thought, "What's in the wind now?" as he followed him, full of curiosity.

"Just write to Mrs. Clevedon, and to the others in this list."

"We are to have company then?"

"Yes, Bertram; you will take kindly to the arrangement, and throw aside your books for a time to join me in entertaining our guests."

"Your will is always my pleasure," was the soft, oily reply; "and I hope Oswald will spare some time from rambling down by the river-side, where he is to be met, but not alone."

This artfully worded remark had the desired effect of eliciting a question from his uncle, who said, "I suppose it was Miss Paget?"

"Yes, sir; I unintentionally overheard their conversation. I am afraid that poor Oswald has wandered from his duty past recall. I would not have mentioned this matter if I had not heard you express abhorrence at the thought of either of us contracting a *mesalliance*."

"I have put a stop to that, Bertram; let his case be a warning to you. And now you get on with your task, while I join the general. We are going to the stables to see the stock and won't be back for some time."

"My letter has done its work," Bertram muttered; "the fair Jessie will be lonely and want comforting. I will try to do that, especially as I cannot marry without the uncle's consent. Besides, Jessie might turn out a great catch one of these days, when her father finds this wonderful seam of coal he is always raving about. The woman I marry must be well dowered. Perhaps, after all, Oswald's love is not so disinterested as he would have her suppose."

He finished the letters and dispatched them, little dreaming that they would bring to the Hall some one who would influence his whole future to an extent that he would have deemed impossible.

In a week's time Dinton Hall was transformed from a sedate bachelor's home into a mansion of mirth and gayety.

Silvery laughter floated through the corridors, and mingled with the sounds of music, both vocal and instrumental.

Elegantly dressed women and pretty girls flitted about the house and grounds, imparting a nameless charm to a grand old spot that had rarely been so invaded.

Lawn tennis, archery, and the old-fashioned but favorite game of croquet came in for their share of attention, and helped the guests to while away many an hour.

One wet morning they were assembled in the billiard room, chatting gayly and watching the progress of a game between Bertram and the fascinating Mrs. Everest, a wealthy young widow, who had taken all New York by storm on her arrival from England with letters of introduction to eminent bankers and many of the elite of society.

Hers was a dark, bold type of beauty, with brilliant, flashing eyes that seemed too restless to remain fixed on any object more than a few seconds together.

Teeth of dazzling whiteness gave a charm to a mouth that, to be perfectly beautiful, should have been smaller and less sensuous, the lips being full, though as ripe as cherries.

Her figure was graceful, though plump, and she took great pains to display it to the greatest advantage.

Worth, the man-milliner, had put forth all his skill, backed by the resources of his staff, to make her costume a work of art, and she looked as Cleopatra might have done when she captivated Antony.

She quite charmed Bertram, whose eyes greedily followed her every movement during the game, and dwelt admiringly on her face, with its ever-varying expression.

"Mr. Oswald, do look! I declare the sun is actually coming out at last, and we shall be able to have our ride to the glen."

The speaker was Miss Agnes Clevedon, a charming blonde, with a sweet, clear-cut profile, and an elegant figure, above the medium height.

Her turquoise satin *negligee* robe suited her style of beauty to perfection, while her animated expression, toned down by her soft, languishing eyes, made a very beautiful picture.

Oswald joined her, and, evidently enjoying her society, chatted freely.

"Allow me to show you my fern-ry, Miss Clevedon. I should like your opinion upon my collection before we start."

"I shall be delighted; I like ferns very much."

Mr. Dinton smiled with inward satisfaction as he thought:

"The general was right; Oswald has found out already that there are beautiful women in his own 'set.' They will soon efface Miss Paget."

"This is a lovely fern, Mr. Wyncott. Is it indigenous to this part of the country?"

"Yes, it is; and is a gift from a dear friend."

"It must be from a lady, then," she said, archly.

"To tell you would be breaking confidence," he said, gayly; "but I will not keep you in suspense, as I know the curiosity of the fair sex when once aroused. It was presented to me by General Pringle, who, no doubt, could obtain others from the same source."

"I should like one of the same kind. I have a mind to make desperate love to the general, and enlist him in the ranks of my fern-gatherers, who, by the by, are nearly all enthusiasts. May I not enroll you under my banner?"—this demurely, though with a swift glance at him.

But, with the quick instinct of her sex, she saw that the shaft did not strike home.

Before he could reply Mrs. Clevedon entered on the arm of Mr. Dinton.

"So we have found the runaways," she said, with a significant smile.

"It would give me great pleasure," he whispered, "Mrs. Clevedon, to see them always together. May I rely upon you offering no opposition?"

"Nothing would afford me greater happiness, as my daughter greatly admires your nephew."

Other guests trooped in, among whom was the Reverend Edward Sewell, curate—a useful pet among the ladies—who talked learnedly of the flora of various countries until his companions deserted him one by one—a fact which escaped his observation, as he was so short-sighted as to be nearly blind.

"This, my dearest Mrs. Everest," he said, "is a famous cactus. I am afraid you cannot see its beauties in that light; permit me to lead you closer."

He mistook one of the limbs of this spiky plant for the dashing widow, and fancied he was grasping her hand, being undeceived only when his fingers were badly pierced.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "I beg your pardon! I am so short-sighted, I hope I did not disturb the beads on your dress?"

Receiving no reply, and thinking it very odd, he peered through his glasses, and quickly learned that he was alone.

Meanwhile, Oswald and Miss Clevedon had started for their ride through the pleasant valley, past the river and up a slight incline in the direction of Jessie's cottage, over which roses and honeysuckle climbed, scenting the air with their delicate perfume.

"What a sweet, pretty place, Mr. Wyncott!" exclaimed Miss Clevedon. "How I should like to halt awhile, and make a sketch of it! Do you know them?"

"Yes; they are old friends; but I think you will find objects of greater interest a little further on—a deserted church, for instance, covered with lichen and ivy."

"Thanks; I prefer this. Ah! here is a lady, I declare! She is very pretty, but a little too rustic."

Oswald bit his lip with vexation at this open criticism of his *fiancée*, who, in his eyes, was perfection itself.

Raising his hat, he bade Jessie a courteous "Good-day," a thrill of tenderness underlying his tone which did not escape the acute perception of Miss Clevedon.

After a formal introduction had taken place, Oswald said, "Miss Clevedon wishes to make a sketch of your house, she admires it so. May she?"

"Certainly," she replied; but inwardly she wondered what motive could have prompted her lover to bring this aristocratic woman to pry into her poverty.

The situation was becoming awkward, when some dark, heavy, overhanging clouds overhead hurried Miss Clevedon's departure.

Oswald found an opportunity to whisper to Jessie:

"My darling, you must trust me, and have faith in my undying love, however appearances may be against me."

Their homeward ride was a silent one, each being occupied with their own thoughts.

Oswald was vexed at his companion's waywardness in calling at the cottage, as he could not help seeing how it had pained his darling.

On reaching the Hall, Miss Clevedon, when alone with the ladies, spoke of their visit to the Pagets, and said, "How nice it is for them to have such a friend as Mr. Wyncott! I declare the girl seemed positively in love with him!"

"Perhaps her affection is only platonic, and quite sisterly. There's a good deal of that kind of thing being carried on in society nowadays—don't you think so, Mrs. Clevedon?" asked Mrs. Everest.

"I am no authority upon such matters, my dear; but things are very much changed since I was a girl," replied Mrs. Clevedon. "My opinion is that no gentleman has any right to even flirt outside the pale of his own set; but I think Oswald is heart-whole as yet."

"But will not remain long so, eh, Agnes?" remarked the pretty widow.

"I have no wish to captivate any man," the girl replied.

"Then you are a perfect *rara avis*, my dear, and a model that should be held up for an example to all young damsels. You are too good for this sublunary sphere of ours. I could not exist if I abandoned all hopes of making a conquest."

"Has a woman no more important duties in life, my dear Meliora, than to spend her time in spreading a net for eligibles? If a man could not love me for my own sake alone, and wanted leading on by a succession of wiles and artifices, then I aver that he is not worth the winning."

The first dressing-bell rung for dinner, and ended the discussion.

CHAPTER IV.

MANEUVERING.

THE next day the weather was all that could be desired. The sun had come out and

dried the earth, making it in every way suitable for the picnic that had been arranged for that morning.

There were some glorious woods, shady nooks, and fairy-like dells near, into which lovers could ramble and talk sweet nonsense to their hearts' content.

While preparing for the serious business of the day, which with ladies means making themselves attractive and as pretty as may be (a commendable effort on their part, and one which society sternly claims at their hands), Mrs. Clevedon and her daughter enjoyed one of those delicious *tete-a-tetes* which have been known before now to decide the fate not only of individuals, but of empires.

"But, dear mamma, he makes no sign," Agnes said. "I have led him on according to your wishes. He talks pleasantly, and plays the part of cavalier to perfection; but, beyond that, he is ice itself."

"My dear Agnes, a skillful tactician never considers difficulties, except to overcome them; the campaign has only commenced, and you cannot expect the citadel to surrender too quickly, especially when he has an ally so potent as that artful minx to make his resistance more determined than it could otherwise be. But all the chances are in your favor. His uncle is favorable to the match. You are young, and as my daughter, very beautiful."

This with a smile of self-satisfaction, and a haughty glance, as if challenging the verdict of the world.

"I wish, mamma, you could persuade Oswald to pay us a visit at Clevedon; I could have him all to myself then; and I know so many pretty spots where I could entice him which are so delightful, that love seems to lurk everywhere, ready to spring out upon the unwary loiterers."

"The period of romance has passed in your life, my dear, and that of the practical should take its place. Oswald will have a very handsome fortune at his uncle's death, which cannot in the ordinary course of events fail to happen soon. Not that I wish the dear old gentleman to die, but business is business, and however much we may dislike it, it forces itself upon our serious attention, especially when you are as well aware as I am that, owing to your papa's expensive tastes and your brother's extravagances, we are heavily in debt, and creditors won't be content to wait forever!"

"All this is very sad, mamma; but I cannot force Oswald to declare himself. However, I will do my best to-day to win."

"Spoken like a sensible girl, my dear! You will have him all to yourself, and from what I can perceive of his character, his heart is not so impenetrable as you may imagine, for I have seen him gazing admiringly at you when in your society. Under skillful management his admiration might be made to develop into a tenderer passion. What do you propose wearing to-day, Agnes? I am anxious you should look your best and brightest."

"What do you say to the last garden costume from Madame Elise's, mamma?"

"Just the thing, my love; but make haste, as time presses!"

In a short while Agnes Clevedon appeared before her mother for inspection and approval.

"Simply charming," Mrs. Clevedon exclaimed, admiringly. "And now run downstairs, my dear, as I see the guests are arriving and Oswald is giving orders for the carriages, and you must contrive to ride with him."

As Miss Clevedon sailed toward the party who were fast collecting, a hushed murmur of admiration followed her; and no wonder, for she looked superbly handsome in her floating robes of *ecru* lace, with its knots of wild flowers gleaming here and there: a Gainsboro' hat, with its wreath of the same simple flowers; and parasol whose color harmonized so well with her attire, and gave her face so piquant and coquettish an expression.

Mr. Dinton was the first who addressed her, saying:

"You look as sweet and fresh, my dear, as

the morning itself, and will turn the brains of half the young sparks of our party; but be merciful, pray, for remember my nephew may require, before to-morrow morning, to order pistols for two and coffee for one, if you use those pretty bright eyes of yours too freely."

A smile of satisfied vanity passed over her pretty patrician face at the praise and compliments from Oswald's uncle, for she thought:

"I am sure to win him, especially as Mr. Dinton is on our side; besides, I love him, and am far prettier than Miss Paget, and have wealth and position, too; but this day must decide my fate. Other men have wooed me, but none have touched my heart like Oswald."

The gay party were about to start, seated to their satisfaction.

Bertram had contrived to have the charming widow in the carriage with him; and his brother was requested to drive the basket phaeton and ponies, as his uncle laughingly said he had no room for youngsters.

Nothing loth, Agnes seated herself by Oswald's side, his uncle saying slyly:

"No loitering on the road, my boy; for remember you have a long drive before you get to Burley Woods, and I shall time you."

"I shall not be far behind, sir," he replied, as he touched the thoroughbred ponies with his whip and drove out of the gates.

Mrs. Clevedon looked serenely happy as she saw them drive past their carriage in a few minutes' time, at a smart, steady pace, and mused:

"How clever of Mr. Dinton to contrive their going together. Dear Agnes is really inimitable to-day. I shall be quite surprised if Oswald does not declare himself."

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Mr. Dinton, saying:

"What do you think of our couple of turtle-doves?—they make a handsome pair."

"Yes indeed, I was thinking the same when you spoke."

"They would do credit to any family, my dear Mrs. Clevedon; and I don't mind candidly confessing that it is the one wish of my life to see them united."

"I esteem and admire Oswald," said Mrs. Clevedon, "for his high and noble qualities, independently of his being your nephew, which, in itself, is sufficient in my eyes to be a passport to a mother's favor."

At last they reached Burley Woods, and were both surprised to find that Oswald and his companion had arrived before them.

Agnes was seated on the trunk of a tree, looking very sweet and happy, with Oswald lying full length beside her on the grass, talking animatedly.

As they were summoned to the rustic luncheon, General Pringle approached the group with Jessie and an elderly lady on his arm.

Had a bomb-shell fallen among the turf-spread banquet, there could not have been greater consternation and disappointment to a few members of the party.

A look of anger and hauteur passed over Agnes Clevedon's face as she turned to her mother after having bowed to the new-comers, and said: "Mamma, my day is spoilt entirely now that Miss Paget has been forced on our notice by that eccentric General Pringle. I was so happy a few minutes since; he so gentle, so—But there!" she added, impatiently; "I detest her, and feel sure that her coming here to-day has no other meaning than to try and wrest him from me."

"Hush, my dearest child; have more confidence in yourself! I know he likes and admires you; show this girl that such is the case, and all may yet be well. Never despair!"

General Pringle was determined to gain Jessie's consent to make one of the party at the picnic, as he wished to bring his new beautiful favorite before the notice of his friend Dinton, thinking that her sweet face and simple alluring ways would charm his friend and win his consent to his nephew's union.

Many had been his visits to the cottage, always with some excuse—a fern or orchid to be

examined and named, as Jessie was an oracle upon matters of botany; but his true motives were to become acquainted with her real sentiments toward Oswald.

At last he prevailed upon her to come, and he was exceedingly pleased to see how bright and happy she appeared.

A look of displeasure crossed the face of Mr. Dinton when he was introduced to her—a look which she could not help noticing, with a sad feeling at her heart, as she thought, "He will never like me or give his consent. Why should he be so hard and stern? What have I done to cause him to dislike me? I cannot help poor papa having peculiar crotchets."

And she strolled away out into the woods under the shade of the old forest trees, to think and ponder.

The scent of the new-mown hay was wafted toward her by the summer breeze, and she could hear, at a distance, the voices of hay-makers.

She had been alone about half an hour under the gentle pines, strolling sometimes, seated at others, in lazy lotus-eating fashion, building castles, and then toppling them down, as her imagination would conjure up hopes and fears.

Her meditations were suddenly aroused by the crackling of brambles and leaves close at hand, which told her that footsteps were approaching, and she saw, to her dismay and disappointment, Bertram Wyncott coming toward her, saying, "How is it that I find the charming Miss Paget a wanderer in the woods, instead of giving us the sunshine of her presence this glorious afternoon?"

"Because, at times, I like solitude, Mr. Wyncott."

"But there are claims that sometimes overrule your own inclinations and tastes, which force themselves upon one, especially when one's society is so valued as—" he was about to add 'yours,' but Jessie interrupted him by saying, coldly—

"I am not one of the valued few, Mr. Wyncott, as I know only two among your party, and they will excuse my absence, I doubt not."

"Are you sure, Miss Paget?" he said, meaningly.

"I cannot say for certain," she stammered, as the warm blood suffused her brow and face; "there may be another; but among so large a party I could not be certain."

"Oh, that I could dare win her for my own, and throw my ambition to the winds!" he thought, as he gazed into the limpid depths of her eyes, at the neatly braided little golden head, which was bare. "If she would only love me, as she evidently does my hated brother, I would throw myself at her feet and risk all."

He drank in her sweet, artless presence, and contrasted it with the bold, voluptuous beauty of the woman whom he knew he could gain for a wife, and an irresistible feeling seized him to possess himself of this treasure at any cost.

He watched her slim, ungloved hands and rounded finger-tips, and frowned with hate as his eyes caught the jeweled circlet that gleamed in the sun, and said, bitterly, "I suppose you were waiting for some favored, happy mortal, who, doubtless, is close at hand?"

"No, no; indeed I am quite alone," she replied, gently, for she thought, "Perhaps he may be my brother some day, and I must be kind and patient with him."

She little dreamt in her innocent heart that a torrent of passion was bearing him away from reason and prudence as he stood alone in her presence, intoxicated, entranced.

A dangerous silence ensued, which she broke by saying, a little timidly, as she glanced at his features, "I think I must be getting back; but I want to get this root of ivy up if I can. Is it not pretty?"

As she bent down to loosen the roots, the mad impulse which would not be quenched, possessed him, and he caught her in his arms in one mad embrace as he poured forth a tor-

rent of wild endearments, saying, "My beautiful—my own! if you will but give me one word of encouragement, I will forfeit all chance of fortune from my uncle, and face the world, for I love you, ay! and would do or dare anything to win you, my sweet one, my darling!"

She felt his hot breath and his clinging arms about her, and saw his passion-lit eyes burning with eager fire; and with one supreme effort, born of mad fear and horror, wrested herself from his grasp, and struck him with her hand across the cheek, which received a severe scratch from the diamonds that glittered in her ring of betrothal.

"How dare you speak to me of love," she cried, "and outrage all sense of manly honor, when you must know I am the affianced wife of your brother? I scorn you, and tell you that were I free, and had never given my love, as I have, to Oswald, I should never listen to your offer, and would die rather than become your wife!"

"I am not aware that I ever asked you to fill that position, Miss Paget!" he replied, with a vindictive, malignant smile, enraged by the pain that she had inflicted and the awkward position he was placed in to account for his absence to his friends, especially Meliora Everest, who he knew would ask him innumerable questions.

"I will make you pay for your scorn and hate, Jessie!" he murmured, as he tried to stop the bleeding with his cambric handkerchief.

Miss Paget watched with pain and regret the mischief she had done, and with her own little hands, forgetful of the great provocation she had received, ran to a little rivulet that was trickling its pellucid water over moss and lichen, bowlders of stone and wild grasses, dipped her handkerchief in, and soaking it with the cool water, returned, and offered it to him, saying, "We have both of us acted very wrongly. I am deeply sorry I hurt you. Pray let us forget, if possible, what has passed, and remember that we may some day be brother and sister. I would wish to blot out what has occurred rather than two brothers should be enemies."

The fearful thought of Oswald and his brother acting, perhaps, the very role over again of Cain and Abel alarmed her, and she fancied she saw them locked in one deathly embrace that would only end in the victory of the stronger; and she burst into a flood of tears as she held out her hand, and pleaded for forgiveness, which he reluctantly gave at last.

"I forgive all, everything," she added, as she left him to reach the picnic party by another path, "because you are his brother."

"Yes, and I will let you have him, vixen; but you shall have a beggar for a husband—an outcast—a felon!" he muttered, as he ground his heel in the soft, yielding turf, and walked quickly toward the revelers.

Oswald missed the sweet face of Jessie, and had wandered through the woods, but had not caught a glimpse of her white-robed little figure.

He was therefore thrown entirely upon Agnes's society, as all the party had strolled away on different explorations.

"I should so like to see that deserted church," she said, archly. "Will you take me, Mr. Wyncott?"

"Certainly," he replied, gallantly. "Your wishes, Miss Clevedon, are my commands," as he offered her his arm, and they strolled in its direction.

"How silent he is!" she thought, as they wended their way through the rich verdure, on through the flowering glades, and beneath the shadowy trees, which glinted in the warm sunshine, and made a cool shade for lingering lovers.

Presently Agnes broke the calm silence by exclaiming, "How charming! Do look, Mr. Wyncott! There is the dear old ruin just peeping through the foliage. How beautiful and picturesque it looks from here!"

"I beg your pardon. I fear I am but a

very poor companion," he said, apologetically. "I was in a kind of brown study; but I promise to be a better cicerone if you will pardon me," he added, laughingly.

"I will forgive you, certainly," she returned, archly; "but under one condition—that you tell me what scientific subject engaged your thoughts, for you know I feel sure it was a very interesting one."

"Indeed, I crave your mercy, fair lady. My mind was lost in vain dreams and fantasies that I could not bore you by relating."

"Are you sure that it would bore me, Mr. Wyncott?" she replied softly. "I think I may say that your thoughts would interest me somewhat."

And the delicate gloved hand pressed his arm firmer as she looked bewitchingly up into his face for his reply.

"She is certainly a dazzling and beautiful girl," he thought; "but my heart is steeled against even her fascinations, which are great. How I wish Bertram would make her his wife; I should like her immensely for a sister," as he replied to her tremulous little speech somewhat coldly.

"My thoughts, dear Miss Clevedon, are mere vagaries, empty ones, devoid of interest, and not worthy so much honor as you may deem fit to bestow upon them."

She bit her lip with vexation, since his tone and manner gave her no little heart fluttering, and brought a conscious blush to her cheek.

As she murmured, "It is useless; he does not care for me; my affection is wasted and lost upon one who thinks more of the rustic, cold, passionless girl who forced her society upon us to-day than of me, who have been the acknowledged belle of the New York season. What infatuation!"

They had reached the old church at last, and knocked at the door of a little cottage close by, which was at last opened by a deaf old dame, who looked askance at the visitors, as if debating whether to grant their request to enter the church or not.

But a *douceur* in the shape of some silver had the desired effect, and she opened a heavy, iron-girded door with a key from a rusty bunch, and presented it to Oswald, saying: "You can guide yourselves, as I am suffering from the rheumatism in my old bones, and these damp stones make me worse, yer honor."

After pointing the way to the belfry, she hobbled off.

They went up the gloomy, musty-smelling opening, and then came to another dark, heavy door, which was clamped with nails that were rusty, and had held together a thick cloth for years.

He turned the key, and they walked into a dimly-lighted chamber, from the windows of which they could get a magnificent view of the country for miles around.

"Why, this is the chamber I have heard so much about," exclaimed Agnes. "What a dear, delightful old place! Why, you could conjure up any amount of ghostly stories in this antiquated place, with the sun just giving us a faint light through those heavy-barred windows."

"You are right," he said, "it is well worth coming to see; but we have left it rather too late, I fear, for the sun is not powerful enough at this time of the evening to see all the beauties of the landscape."

They leaned leisurely against the windows, admiring first one view and then another, till Miss Clevedon suggested they should return, as time was fleeting and the shades of evening were deepening.

They approached the door, but to their dismay found it had closed upon them softly, but not the less effectually.

Oswald knocked lustily at it with his stick, and tried to shake it, but it would not yield to all his force, neither was there any response to his knocking and shouting.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "we are in a dreadful fix, Miss Clevedon; one that I would

not have had happened for the world, as we may be penned up here for—"

But he did not finish his sentence when he caught sight of the white face and trembling figure of his companion in misfortune.

Again and again he struggled with the door and shouted till the moldy walls rung again, but with no better success.

"It is no use, Mr. Wyncott," she gasped, with pallid lips, as she thought: "Perhaps we shall be immured in this cold, damp tomb all night. The woman is deaf and thinks we have left the church, and we are lost. What will mamma and all of them think?"

The poor girl was in an agony of terror which went to Oswald's heart.

The light grew dimmer and dimmer, and she shivered in the thin lace dress, the chill, damp moldy air penetrating its delicate texture.

Every now and again Oswald would knock and thump at the door, and then shout, but not a sound—only his own voice, which echoed weirdly round the apartment.

"Let me wrap you in this coat," he said, with a serious entreating air, as she sat with her face buried in her hands, crouched in a corner.

"No, no: not your coat!" said the huddled-up figure. "I am not very cold"—shivering as she spoke—"but I am so anxious about mamma and the others. They will be so alarmed, and I am so unhappy in this place, it is so dark."

"Pray don't refuse it, Miss Clevedon," he urged, pleadingly.

"I think I could bear even this place with him," she thought, as the formal "Miss Clevedon" jarred upon her heart. "Why does he not call me Agnes?"

But, alas for her dream of hope! not a trace of affection was in his eyes as he wrapped her gently and tenderly as a brother would a loved sister in his coat, and then paced to and fro to keep warmth in his frame.

"I must insist that you wear this now," she said presently, "for I am much warmer, and you must be dreadfully cold."

"I beg you will not take it off for the world, as it would only be in my way I assure you, for I am thinking of piling up that old furniture to see if I cannot drop on the outside, and go and get aid and let you out."

"I fear it will not be possible," she said, in a hopeless tone.

"I beg to differ, Miss Clevedon, and now am going to prove to you that my boyhood's *penchant* for climbing and jumping will, perhaps, prove of service."

By the light of a silver-crested young moon he collected together some loose timbers to stand on, and at last reached an unbarred window, just the size of his body.

Agnes was aroused from her thoughts by a cheery shout from Oswald, saying:

"Dear Miss Clevedon, take heart of grace; all will soon be right, for I can easily get down from here, as the drop is not more than fifteen feet, which a climber of these mountains does not heed. Keep up your courage; I shall not be long before I return."

He soon accomplished his task, though it was more difficult than he had guessed, as he had to hoist himself by his hands on to the window-ledge to break his descent, which was more than twenty feet, and which stunned him for some minutes. But he soon recovered himself and ran to obtain assistance.

Poor Miss Clevedon was crouched up in the gloomy place, wondering what would be said of her strange absence, and with him.

"Why did I ever come here?" she murmured.

"It was all my fault, and mamma will think that all is settled between us, and he has not spoken one word of love, though we have been alone. They will twit me, and she will look horrified when she hears we disappeared together; perhaps may even taunt me by making remarks in her simple, artless way upon my indiscretion! Oh, why did this Paget girl come here to witness my humiliation?"

The slow minutes dragged by, bringing her

only misery and fear, and she fancied now that ghostly shapes and unearthly sounds were surrounding her, grinning at her unhappiness.

At last a crashing sound, mingled with many voices, was heard, and she knew that Oswald had returned with help.

"Thank Heaven!" she said; "he has come at last!"

The door was opened, and amid the glare of lanterns she saw the welcome face of Oswald, and, tottering toward him, would have fallen, had he not caught her in his arms and supported her.

She soon recovered, for he had brought from a house near by some brandy, and in a short time they were riding as fast as their borrowed horse and vehicle would take them to the Hall.

In the mean time, Mrs. Clevedon and Mr. Dinton were marveling at the absence of the two missing truants.

"It is my belief, Mrs. Clevedon, that the pair have stolen a march upon us and taken it into their heads to walk back."

"Surely dear Agnes would not be so imprudent as to fatigue herself so unnecessarily!" returned her mother, somewhat impatiently.

"Is any one missing?" inquired a fussy, short-sighted old maid.

"Oh, no; only Mr. Wyncott and Miss Clevedon!" replied a sour young spinster, who had been dangling after the two nephews of Dinton Hall for three years, and was quite pleased at the chance of saying something spiteful about the lovely girl who she thought had won the long-coveted prize.

"It is no use waiting any longer," said Bertram. "I have no doubt that Oswald and Miss Clevedon are perfectly safe and will be home when we arrive," giving a hasty glance at Jessie to see if the shaft had taken effect.

"You are right," replied his uncle. "We will start, as the evening dews are getting anything but pleasant."

In a very short time they started; but there was a silence among most of the party, very different to the gay and cheerful no-day drive.

General Pringle had cunningly contrived to sit behind his favorite, who was in anything but a happy mood, as she thought:

"Yes, this lovely, fair, graceful girl has at last won him. Why else has he stayed away for hours? And I had such faith in his love and constancy! Alas! his vows were traced in the sand!"

"This is a glorious night, Miss Paget," said the general, cheerily, as they drove briskly along.

"Yes, it is very lovely," she replied, absently.

"I fear you are not quite so happy as I should wish you to be, but don't mind an old soldier like me," pressing her hand tenderly. "Cheer up and trust your lover. He is as true as steel, though appearances are against him; I would stake my sword on his honor and faith."

"You are so kind, dear general," she said, "and I am grateful!" And she pressed his hand, and raised it to her lips, and he felt a warm little tear drop as she released it.

And he thought: "Dear, sweet little woman, one of Heaven's greatest treasures, who could be hard enough to cause that drop of crystal to flow from one so pure, so gentle? By Heaven, I would never look upon his face again if he played her false!"

Meanwhile Agnes shrunk back shivering, exclaiming every now and then:

"Oh, make him drive faster, faster! We are going so slow, Mr. Wyncott!"

"We shall soon be there now. My only fear is that you will take cold," he returned, in a concerned tone.

"It is not that I fear, but of what poor mamma will think." This with a spice of bitterness. "Will the road never end? It did not seem half so long and dreary this morning."

At last they arrived at Dinton Hall, and were greeted with a volley of inquiries; and condolences and light chaff were showered upon

Oswald as he made his appearance in the drawing-room to explain matters.

Agnes escaped to her apartment, followed by her mother, where she indulged in a true feminine flood of tears.

"My dearest girl, confide in me; I can see that all is well."

"What do you mean, mamma? Do you mock me in my sorrow?"

"Mock you, my child? Explain yourself. You and Oswald having been away from our party for five hours, there is but one conclusion to come to, and that is, that you are his affianced wife."

"Do not torture me further, mamma, for indeed your child is sick at heart. I admit I have been alone with Mr. Wyncott, but not one word of love has escaped his lips." And she buried her face in her mother's bosom.

"This, my darling, must be seen to. I will see that my daughter is not made the laughing-stock of the neighborhood," she said, kissing her tenderly and disengaging her damp robes from the trembling, graceful form.

"If you ever loved me, do not, I implore you, blame Oswald! It was all my fault, and mine alone! He was honor itself! You promise me, mother mine?"—looking beseechingly into the proud aristocratic face, which softened as she looked down upon the pure features of her loved child.

"Yes; for your sake I promise!" But it was a hard battle that proud woman had to fight with her haughty nature to see her child cast aside unnoticed by the man to whom she had given her young affections.

CHAPTER V.

A CRISIS.

THANKS to the mediation of General Pringle, what promised to be a very unpleasant affair for Oswald turned out the reverse.

Jessie was mollified, Mr. Dinton talked over, and Mrs. Clevedon out-manuevered by this clever old soldier, aided by the proud spirit of Agnes, who, however, felt embittered against Oswald for being the cause of an *esclandre* which might have compromised her in the eyes of society.

"No man of feeling would have seen a lady placed in such a position without offering her the only reparation that lay in his power," she mused, when she had time to look the matter in the face. "How I hate that designing Miss Paget, who certainly is angling for Oswald; but I shall take the first opportunity of forcing him to give her up, and shall talk the matter over seriously with mamma."

The girl's pride had come to her aid in the first instance, hence her appeal to her mother not to take advantage of Oswald's delicate position toward her.

"I was a little simpleton," she soliloquized, "not to allow mamma to manage the affair, and have therefore played into the hands of my rival, not to mention that I am now laughed at and forced to listen to spiteful remarks made under cover of harmless raillery."

A few days after the picnic Mr. Dinton and all his guests were invited to a ball to be held at the club rooms in the village.

Thanks to General Pringle, Jessie received tickets for herself and friend.

The ball-room presented a magnificent spectacle, with its banners of all nations, its choice exotics, and its array of fair women and handsome men.

Jessie was glad of an opportunity to meet her lover in public, because she felt that her beauty must command admiration and hoped that he would feel piqued at the attentions of other men. She was too much a woman to forget the little episode of the picnic.

Oswald was certainly proud of being the accepted lover of such a beautiful woman as Jessie, but not a little jealous of the attentions she met with at the hands of men of wealth and position.

Jessie's claim to be considered the queen of beauty could not be challenged.

Her chaperon, Mrs. Williams, the wife of a leading medical practitioner, was proud of her lovely charge and the attention which she herself received.

Jessie was dressed in floating robes of white tulle and lace. Her only ornaments were white roses and myrtle leaves, which she wore in clusters on her dress, bosom, and in her rich braids of glossy hair.

A nameless charm pervaded her every movement; and the one inquiry that went round the rooms was: "Who is she?"

Miss Clevedon was perfectly eclipsed by the girl she termed a "rustic," and her enjoyment was spoilt for the evening.

She felt piqued, too, at Oswald's abstraction when conversing or dancing with her, for she plainly perceived that his eyes were constantly following Jessie wherever she moved.

Mrs. Everest, who looked like an Eastern princess, came in for her fair share of attention; but Bertram was constantly in attendance upon her, and greatly pleased his uncle, who put it all down to politeness, little dreaming that it had a deeper meaning.

The general sought out his favorite, Jessie, and talked to her of Oswald as they sat in a recess, screened by some very fine azaleas.

"You must trust Oswald, my dear, for he has a difficult part to play. He is true to the core, and does not care one jot for Miss Clevedon. You both have a friend in me, and must not be cast down."

"I cannot bear being placed in a false position. He dare not claim me openly, and my heart is eaten out with suspense, knowing the temptations which surround him in the shape of wealth and position, both of which he would lose by wedding me. There are times when I wish we had never met."

"Come, come! you must not succumb to such gloomy thoughts, especially to-night! But here comes Oswald, to claim you for the next dance, I suppose. Be kind to him, for he sadly needs comforting."

A blush of pleasure and a brilliant love-lit gleam flashed from her eyes as he led her forward to join in the mazes of the delightful waltz.

Agnes Clevedon looked on with bitterness, wondering how he could prefer a penniless girl to her—she, with her attractions of wealth, station and acknowledged beauty.

Bertram smiled sardonically, and thought: "He little knows of the storm which must burst over his head before long, through thus openly defying his uncle. I take good care not to show my cards, or I, too, might share in his ignominy."

Oswald, when they had finished dancing, led his darling to one of the balconies where they were comparatively free from intrusion.

"Take me in, Oswald," she said, "I do not wish to get you into trouble with your uncle, who has not deigned to notice me at all to-night."

"He is prejudiced, darling, and knows not your worth, or he would be the first to acknowledge it."

"My father has offended him, and there is no hope for us, dear Oswald."

"There is every hope, sweet one, in the strength of our love, which increases every hour. Rather than give you up, I would sacrifice, ay, even my uncle's affection, which I prize dearly."

"You would?" she said, with eyes that glistened with unshed tears of happiness. "I wish that I could be more worthy of your devoted love, for I must tell you that I have lately doubted it. I knew you cared for me, but I feared that the beauty of Miss Clevedon and her fascinations would chase my image from your heart."

"No woman can or ever will do that, Jessie," he said solemnly, as he pressed her yielding form to his heart and kissed those warm ripe lips that trembled with love's emotion beneath his passion-laden eyes.

At this moment the heavy curtains were hastily thrown open, and Mr. Dinton stood before them, his suppressed passion for the moment depriving him of speech.

"Sir," he said, at last, "you are free to continue in your disobedience and to defy me, as from this moment you are no nephew of mine."

"This is neither the time nor place, uncle, to put me on my defense. Some respect is, I think, due to this lady. Come, Jessie, I will conduct you to your chaperon."

Mr. Dinton stood aside to permit them to pass, half-regretful when he looked at the sweet, sad face which his unkind words had overshadowed with pain and humiliation, and inclined to relent, if Oswald would but show some deference to his wishes.

Mrs. Clevedon stood close by with her daughter, well pleased that she had put him on the lovers' track.

When they returned to the gay assembly, the lights bewildered Jessie's brain to an extent that made further enjoyment impossible, and in a few minutes she left with her chaperon, who could see that her lovely charge was really ill and upset, and shrewdly guessed that Oswald was in some way the cause of it all.

Next morning Mr. Dinton summoned Oswald to his presence.

"I suppose you know what I wish to speak to you about?"

"Yes; and I regret that my affection for a lady should cause you such offense, sir. In all other matters you are entitled to, and would always receive, my most implicit obedience, but where my future happiness is involved I must claim exemption."

"Then all I can say is that it is in this particular that I claim your submission, and tell you once for all that if you marry this girl without my consent you will be beggars; not one cent of my money shall go toward the support of paupers and their progeny."

Enough, sir; forbear. My wife will be no beggar as long as I have arms, and hands, and brain. To work is, after all, better and nobler than to wait for the fruits of another's industry and thrift."

"Hands and brains!—fiddle de-dee! What can you do to support yourself, much less a wife and her madman of a father?"

"Sir, let this interview be brief, as I can see we shall not agree. How could you expect me to continue to submit to threats whenever I incurred your displeasure, and be liable to be turned adrift upon the world at a time, perhaps, when my energies might fail me? I thank you for all your past kindness and evidence of affection, and shall continue to think of you as my best friend and benefactor. Do not let us part in anger, sir"—this as he held out his hand.

"When you have returned to your proper senses I will take your hand; but not till then. The sooner you relieve me of your presence, the better."

Oswald left the room with a feeling of indignation ranking in his heart at the unjust treatment he had received from one whom he had always revered and looked up to as a father.

"Obstinate young rascal, to upset me like this!" his uncle soliloquized, as he dashed a tear away impatiently. "He will never be mad enough to leave the home that has sheltered him in his childhood and carry his Quixotic ideas into practice! If I thought he would, why, by Jove, I would let him marry the girl. I wish my old friend Pringle was here. He knows now to manage the boy better than I ever did."

His reflections were cut short by a tap at the library door, which was followed by the entrance of Mrs. Clevedon, saying:

"Good-morning, Mr. Dinton; I fear that we must take our leave to-day."

"So soon, my dear lady?" he said, placing a chair. "I hope nothing has occurred during your brief stay to render such a step necessary?"

"Oh, dear, no; we have been very happy; but since last evening dear Agnes has felt very indisposed, as she was an unintentional observer of the little scene on the balcony. We were quite sorry for you, and wondered how your nephew could carry on at such a rate in a public place; but what else could be expected of such an upstart as Miss Paget?"

"Believe me, no one has tried harder to cure him of this mad passion than I have, or regret more that your daughter should have been an eye-witness of so unpleasant an affair; but Oswald leaves the Hall to-day, and will not further offend."

These words decided Mrs. Clevedon to leave at once, as she was too good a general to remain when the game was up.

No persuasions on the part of Mr. Dinton could alter her determination to depart at once, which decision was carried into effect with what appeared to be undue haste.

But Mrs. Everest did not accompany them, pleading fatigue and indisposition as her reasons for trespassing for a further period on her host's hospitality.

He was only too pleased, as the house got very dull and lonely now that nearly all his guests had followed the example of Mrs. Clevedon and taken their leave.

Notwithstanding the opinion of Mr. Dinton, Oswald lost no time in packing up and leaving the Hall, as he thought, forever.

His uncle was almost mad when he found that Oswald had taken him at his word and departed without a line of farewell, or leaving his address.

Ringling his bell furiously, he summoned Bertram, and said:

"Where is that ingrate of a brother of yours?"

"I was not even aware he had left till a few minutes ago; but the only wonder to me is that he did not take the step before."

"What do you mean? Do you mean to infer, sir, that I have been unjust or harsh to you or your brother?"

"Nothing was further from my thoughts, uncle. We owe everything to you. What I meant to convey was, that his mad infatuation for Miss Paget would induce him to brave your anger and risk all consequences."

"Whatever he has done will not affect you; but he must be found, for with all his faults I cannot forget his many noble qualities; if he has erred, it is for love's sake."

"I shall take no trouble to find Oswald," Bertram thought, as he walked away; "he has made his bed and must lie on it."

The dinner passed off that evening in almost solemn silence, and Bertram and Mrs. Everest were glad to escape.

The pair adjourned to the drawing-room, leaving Mr. Dinton over his wine.

"Sing me that lovely favorite of mine, dearest, now that we are alone."

"Which, Bertram?"

"Love's Request."

"I will; but it will be for the last time,"—lifting her eyes inquiringly to his face as if to ascertain the effect of her words.

"You cannot mean to leave me," he said, hoarsely. "Do you know, Meliora, that I love you so dearly that to part with you would be worse than death."

He trembled in every limb as he spoke, and looked ashen and careworn, like a prisoner who awaited his sentence.

"I would do or dare anything for your sake. Wealth will eventually be mine; but even now I have money in plenty to lay at your feet!"

A look of triumph passed over her face, but she controlled herself the next moment, and said, coldly, "You forget that you have such a person as an uncle, who can be stern and unbending. Have you spoken to him of your love for me?"

"No, darling; it would be simple madness on my part, and would restore Oswald to favor again. We can be married secretly in New York. Perhaps uncle will not live long; then

you will take your place in society and receive the homage due to your beauty and talents. Say that you will consent, my own darling, and make me the happiest of men."

He took her unresisting hand and drew her toward him, pressing rapturous kisses on her voluptuous lips, sighing for very delight as he felt the pressure of her warm embrace, which was heaven to him.

"It would be mere affectation of me, dear Bertram, to keep you in suspense. I liked and admired you from the very first moment we met, and now love you very dearly."

"And you agree to my proposition, darling?"

"Yes; to anything that can add to your happiness, even to uniting my fate with yours."

His love for her had touched her cold, selfish nature and aroused a passion she did not even guess she was capable of.

She, like him, was not overscrupulous, and having found a congenial spirit, resolved to co-operate in all his schemes.

He, on his part, was delighted at the prospect which her acceptance of him opened up, for in point of wealth she far exceeded all his expectations.

They were aroused from their blissful dreams by the unexpected and somewhat rude entrance of Mr. Dinton, who said, excitedly: "Who's been to my escritoire? My money has been stolen, together with some papers of value."

"Come, Bertram; I want you to place the matter in the hands of a detective at once." Turning to Mrs. Everest, he said: "I must apologize for my apparent rudeness; but I hope, under the circumstances, you will excuse me."

"Certainly, my dear Mr. Dinton," she replied, suavely; but fixing her eyes on Bertram, whose face expressed great alarm. "Perhaps the thief will be traced quickly if you take immediate steps."

Bertram accompanied his uncle to an adjoining room, and after closing the door, said: "I did not wish to say anything before a third party; but have you no suspicion of the culprit, uncle?"

"None. But you cannot mean your brother?"

"Providence," Bertram thought, "has thrown this opportunity in my way. Oswald is under a cloud, and unless I convince uncle that he is guilty of this, he will reinstate him in his favor."

"Why do you hesitate?" his uncle asked. "Why don't you speak out? Whom do you suspect? In Heaven's name, don't say it's Oswald! I could bear all but that! I would have trusted him—ay, with life itself!"

"Heaven knows, uncle, how it wrings my heart to be his accuser; but his hasty flight, coupled with his admission to me that he was in possession of a large sum of money, which he showed me, and part of which was in notes, leaves no doubt as to his guilt. Recollect, too, that he has left no clew to his whereabouts."

Mr. Dinton clasped his hand to his brow and staggered, under the conviction of Oswald's depravity.

"Shall I communicate with a detective now?" Bertram asked, with a cunning leer on his half-averted face.

"No! ten thousand times no! Dare but to breathe a word of his dishonor to a living soul, and, by Heaven! you will be no longer nephew of mine!"

"Your slightest wish will always be a command to me, sir; and I thank you for your clemency to my poor, misguided brother."

"Do not name him in my presence again; he is cut out of my heart, as he will be out of my will, and may Heaven forgive him the anguish he has caused me! Go, leave me; I wish to be alone."

Bertram was only too pleased at the turn affairs had taken, and chuckled over the clever manner in which he had gulled his uncle.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BROTHERS MEET.

A YEAR has passed since Oswald Wyncott left his home to fight the battle of life, with only Jessie's sweet companionship to aid him in his efforts.

She was now his wife—happy, though poor, and with a little one to call forth all her maternal instincts, and to deepen her love for its father.

They resided in the upper part of New York near the park, as Oswald thought the shaded walks and the lovely sheet of water would somewhat compensate his darling for her lost home in the country.

Owing to General Pringle's liberality to the young couple, Oswald was enabled to carry out his professional bent, and was studying hard at the Columbia School of Mines, where he bid fair to become a skilled engineer.

He was quite sure that his uncle had cut him out of his will, and that he had only his own exertions to depend upon to secure a competency for those dear to him.

He had faith in Mr. Paget's prediction that coal would be found on his land, and he was working hard to fit himself to aid the old gentleman in his search.

One evening Jessie met him after his studies were over, and they went together to the Opera House to see Booth as *Hamlet*.

They sat in the balcony, and between the acts caught sight of Bertram and Mrs. Everest in a box.

Oswald's heart yearned toward his brother, for he could not forget the happy days of their childhood, or the pleasant times they had spent together at Dinton Hall.

He and Jessie made their way to the box, sent in their names, and were at once admitted.

"Why, Oswald, you are looking well," said Bertram, offering his hand; "and your wife is positively more charming than ever. Why have you not written? But, pardon me, you need no introduction to this lady, whom you met at the Hall."

"Are you, too, a happy man, Bertram? Poor uncle has got over his scruples at last, I suppose? May I congratulate you?"

A swift glance of intelligence passed between Bertram and Mrs. Everest ere a reply was given to this rather pointed question.

"No, by Jove! old fellow; I could not afford to pay the price for my freedom that you did. He is still awfully savage, but I try hard to bring about a reconciliation between you. Nothing would make me happier than to see you back at the Hall again."

The time passed very pleasantly for the brothers, but Jessie wished herself at home, as Mrs. Everest was too patronizing in her manner, and made her feel uncomfortable.

Upon the commencement of the second act, a visitor entered the box, to whom Bertram said a few hasty words, to which he nodded assent.

The new-comer was introduced as Mr. Cadde, and seemed on the easiest terms with Mrs. Everest and Bertram, much to the surprise of Oswald, considering the man's appearance and general deportment.

Jessie was glad when Oswald led her from the theater, for she had conceived a great dislike, amounting to aversion, for Mrs. Everest.

Bertram called alone at his brother's, and made himself very agreeable, even to nursing the baby, thereby greatly ingratiating himself with the mother.

In his heart he envied Oswald his quiet, domestic happiness, and was forced to admit that Jessie would grace a ducal palace.

It was a pretty picture, that of Jessie presiding at the tea-table, with its snowy cloth, its few choice flowers, and the delicate china and hissing silver urn—the general's present to the young couple.

Bertram could not help admiring the sweet hostess as she glided gracefully about the room, dispensing smiles and cheerfulness, making her

presence felt in a way that many a more pretentious hostess might have copied with advantage.

Her husband's eyes lit up with pleasure when he saw Jessie had donned his favorite tea-robe in honor of the occasion.

This was not to be wondered at, for a prettier picture than she presented, in pale blue cashmere, trimmed with delicate lace, which clustered round her fair bosom and arms, half-concealing them, could not be conceived.

Crimson rosebuds nestled in her hair, fastened to her square bodice, emitting a delicate perfume, and harmonizing well with her creamy white skin.

When the tea equipage was removed, Oswald said:

"Now, my darling wifey, give us a little music. Bertram has never heard you sing."

She seated herself at the piano and sung the plaintive but beautiful song, "In the Gloaming," completely astonishing Bertram, who was himself no mean musician.

Feelings of envy, hatred, and malice worked in his mind, completely poisoning the spring of his enjoyment.

He took his leave with many expressions of brotherly good-will and friendship, which, however, were meaningless.

On reaching his palatial home in Fifth avenue he found no one there to welcome him; but on the table was a note from his legal adviser, Mr. Josiah Caddle, making an appointment for nine that evening.

"More worries! What the deuce does he want? The old story—must meet some infernal bill that has come due, or give another at a ruinous rate. By Jove! things can't go on like this much longer, or I shall be in the Tombs! Instead of my lady being of help to me, she is plunging me hopelessly into difficulties. I must draw upon her resources now, or know the reason why."

Pouring himself out a tumbler of wine, he drank it off, and threw himself upon a lounge in no very amiable frame of mind.

"Oswald has the best of it," he soliloquized. "He is unembarrassed, has an unselfish, loving wife, a bright, happy home, and a profession that will stand him in good stead when I, perhaps, am ruined and disgraced."

"Mr. Caddle, sir," announced a servant in gorgeous livery, as he threw open the door.

"Ah, Wyncott, I am especially fortunate in catching you in. You have read my note, of course. What do you propose doing about the bill which comes due to-morrow?"

"Why, you will meet it, Caddle. It's impossible for me to do so, as you well know."

"My dear sir," the lawyer replied, rubbing his hands, "I am sorry to say that I cannot see my way. Where's my security?"

"In Heaven's name, what security do you now require?" asked Bertram with a heavy frown.

"Why Dinton Hall and its contents."

"What! would you ruin me with my uncle? No, no, Caddle; I am not such a flat as to do that, especially as my wife is a wealthy woman."

"And prudent withal," sneered the lawyer.

"Why don't you influence her to pay your debts? I must tell you that Mr Dinton is bound to hear of your difficulties sooner or later, unless you make an effort to meet them."

In the middle of an angry discussion Mrs. Wyncott sailed in, dressed magnificently, and literally ablaze with jewels.

Both the disputants ceased wrangling, and after a little conversation Mr. Caddle took his leave, promising to aid his client if possible.

"Your visit to Oswald has not improved your temper, Bertram. I suppose you were humiliated by their shabby-genteel appearance? I can sympathize with you. Poor relations are always a great bore."

"At all events, they are not hopelessly involved like we are. Caddle is getting insolent in his demands, and I am growing weary of all this tinsel and glitter. We had better give up this expensive establishment and—"

"Take apartments with your pauper brother, I suppose? I did not marry you for that, Bertram; but had we not better change the subject?"

"I must speak, Melly, before it is too late. If you are to be a woman of position and my future estates are to remain unincumbered, it is time that you came to the rescue with your colossal fortune, about which I am always hearing so much, but have seen so little."

"Mr. Wyncott, remember that I have no debts, and that my fortune is in securities that must not be touched, unless at a ruinous sacrifice. I am not going to enrich money-lenders out of my fortune, nor will anything you may urge shake my resolution. I will now retire. You may join me when you wish."

"Fool that I was," he muttered, "to run my head into this noose! She will not help me, and I dare not confess my embarrassments to my uncle. Why does he persist in living to impoverish me? Oswald may gain possession of my secret and turn the tables with a vengeance. I am standing on the brink of a precipice, over which I may be hurled at any moment. I'll go to my club and try my luck at cards. If I win, I shall not supply Melly with unlimited pin-money. By Jove! I begin to suspect she has sold me after all, and that her large fortune exists only in her imagination."

He walked out of the house in a great rage, calling forth the comments of the footman, who said to the butler, "The governor is in an awful temper to-night—worse than ever! Mr. Caddle knows how to work him up. Shouldn't be surprised if things came to grand smash one of these days. I think I shall give warning in time. It ain't respectable to leave a house what's tumbled down like a pack of cards."

"Well, James, my boy, there is truth in what you urge, but our reputation would not be involved in any crash, except that of glass and china. Let the airystocracy take care of themselves; it is our duty to feather our nests."

After this exchange of professional ideas, the two servants solaced themselves with several glasses of their master's best port, "just to keep up the reputation of the house, you know."

CHAPTER VII.

MR. DINTON'S PROJECT.

BERTRAM, to further hoodwink his uncle, had taken rooms down-town, where he pretended to study hard to fit himself for the bar, to which legal eminence Mr. Dinton fondly hoped his obedient, hard-working, plodding nephew would eventually attain.

"Ah," thought the old gentleman, "I have one nephew who does me credit, and who lives within the income I allow him, and will no doubt marry in accordance with my wishes. As for Oswald, he does not even condescend to write to me, or to make any overtures for reconciliation. I'll just run up to town and call upon Bertram unawares. It will be so nice to see him immersed in his studies, and actually have to drag him away from them to indulge in a little mild dissipation."

"Besides, I have a fine project in view, of which the lucky dog little dreams. I mean to marry him to the sweet Agnes. I like her, should be proud to see her here as mistress of Dinton Hall—she would brighten the place by her charms. In the meanwhile I could, perhaps, by a little diplomacy and tact win the lovely widow for myself, for I am not such a confirmed old bachelor as they suppose. I may yet have an heir to my property, for, by Jove, I feel twenty years younger."

As if to remind him of his age, a rheumatic twinge made him moan with pain.

Meanwhile, Bertram, ignorant of his uncle's schemes, was enjoying himself like a gilded butterfly of fashion, regardless of how money was raised so long as he obtained it.

When too late, he discovered that he had

married an artful, designing woman, who, if she had a fortune, knew how to keep it.

One sunny day Mr. Dinton arrived in New York, and put up at his hotel, which was close to the park.

After refreshing himself, he strolled into the park, as he was hardly ready to go down-town to see his nephew, and so thought he would amuse himself by watching the riding and driving for a short time.

Two gentlemen standing near began to criticize the fair equestrians.

"What a lucky fellow Wyncott is! He must be immensely rich, for he lives up to the tune of twenty thousand a year at least!"

"Yes; but don't you know that his old, shallow-pated uncle finds the coin, while he shuts himself up like an owl in his old rookery somewhere out in the country?"

"I only wish to Heaven that I was in Wyncott's shoes, and had a confiding old party to draw upon, for I shall have to pay a visit very shortly to some money-broker."

Mr. Dinton glared at the speakers, and mentally shook his stick at them.

His rage so engrossed his attention that he failed to see Bertram and his wife, although they rode past his very eyes.

"Melly, dear," said Bertram, leaning across his horse, "there's my uncle. For Heaven's sake, let's get out of this at once, or I'm ruined!"

They managed their escape very cleverly, and Bertram hastened down-town, to take up the role of a student, inwardly quaking lest he should have been seen by his uncle "doing the grand seignior."

Meanwhile, that "shallow-pated individual," as he had been irreverently described, was indulging in invectives against his detractors, whom he designated "puppies," and who, ignorant of his presence or his wrath, strolled away from the spot.

"This accounts for Oswald's independence, and gives a coloring to Bertram's suspicions about the theft. Poor misguided boy! I suppose he is raising money, thinking I will relent at last. I will go and see Bertram at his rooms. It will be a refreshing change after all this display of fashionable and artificial life."

He walked out of the park, and hailing a hack, drove down-town, but found Bertram was not in, though he was expected every minute.

He glanced hastily at the array of musty old law-books that littered the apartment, and thought:

"What a studious turn of mind the lad must have to wade through those formidable and uninteresting volumes! Well, well, I never thought it of him. I should not have been surprised if the other one had chosen such a profession."

His meditations were suddenly interrupted by the hurried entrance of Bertram, who was profuse in apologies for his absence.

"You see, sir, in my profession, I am compelled to run out at any time to attend my brother students when any knotty and complicated point is to be decided."

"Oh, no apologies are necessary, Bertram. I am heartily pleased to see you working so assiduously, and congratulate you upon your energy. I should have apprised you of my visit, but I thought, as you are a merry bachelor, it would not matter if I took you suddenly. You see, I get rather lonely now that you and your brother are gone."

"I am sure I am very pleased to welcome you to my dingy quarters, uncle. My only regret is that I cannot make you as comfortable as I should wish."

"Oh, I am staying at the 'Hudson,' so you must put aside your books and dine with me to-night. I have much to talk to you about, but shall not detain you any longer, for I see you wish to get rid of me at this busy time of the day."

After a little more conversation they parted till seven in the evening.

"Help yourself, Bertram, and then pass the decanter. This is capital wine. I could not better it at Dinton," said Mr. Dinton, when the cloth was cleared. "By the by, I was seated in the park to-day, and overheard something that very much surprised me."

"Indeed, sir!" in an alarmed tone. "What could it have been?"

"Well, I heard that your brother was living at an extravagant rate, spending not less than twenty thousand a year. Now, what puzzles me is, how he manages to raise the money, as he has never applied to me for any help. Can you throw any light upon the mystery?"

"I fear not, as I know very little of his movements. I sometimes hear of him," this evasively.

"Well, suppose we change the subject to one more agreeable? Have you ever thought of settling in life, Bertram?" remarked his uncle; "because that is one of the subjects I wished to speak to you about to-night."

"I have had neither the time nor the inclination to think about it as yet," he returned.

"But I have, and have a proposal to make to you that I think will meet with your approbation. What do you say to the charming Miss Clevedon for a wife? She is young, pretty, amiable and of noble birth."

"I grant all you say, but she does not care for me, I am sure."

"Tut, tut! you know nothing about it! I know her mother would approve of an alliance with us. She told me so when speaking about that scamp Oswald. If she would give her child to him, why should she object to you, who are also a nephew, and the eldest to boot?"

"You forget, sir, that the lady may not care to transfer her affections from one brother to the other, however desirable the connection may be, and I should not care to sue in vain for her smiles."

"You will not object to call upon the ladies, Bertram, and see if your case is hopeless, now that you know that it is my wish? At all events, should you find that Miss Agnes conceives a distaste for your society, you could retire from the field, and no harm would be done either way."

"I will do what you wish, uncle; but I tell you beforehand I have no hope of success," Bertram replied, as he thought, "I am in a pretty fix. I must get him away back to Dinton, and that sharp, or all will be lost. What an unfortunate thing that he should turn up just now! If he were to meet Oswald, I should be utterly ruined."

"By the by, I wish to call upon Mrs. Everest, now I am in New York. She lives on Fifth Avenue, I believe! A charming woman, full of life and spirit, and what I admire most, a proficient in the art of 'how to dress.' Few of our women, Bertram, understand that art, I am sorry to say. Ahem! do you know, I fancied she would not object to exchange her name of Everest for another. She would make a handsome Mrs. Dinton; what do you say?"

"I am so taken by surprise, uncle, that I have no answer to give you," he stammered.

"What is there to cause such astonishment, I should like to know? Is it because I am a few years older than the lady? That makes very little difference where a sensible woman is concerned, and that is undoubtedly what I take Mrs. Everest to be; and you would not be much the loser, you know, after all."

"Pardon me, sir; I do not presume to question your motives. I only wish to suggest that of course I did not reasonably expect you would think of entering the married state at this period—"

"Of my life," I suppose you were going to say, "and that you consider I am an old fool for desiring to make my declining years brighter and happier. It was ever so with young men; they always begrudge their elders a few of the pleasures, so that they themselves indulge to their heart's content. Jove, you are a selfish set, the best of you," he said, gloomily.

"I am sorry you should think so, uncle. I

spoke on the spur of the moment, without wishing to dictate to you in any way; and as you have told me so much of your intentions, perhaps I should be wise to tell you that Mrs. Everest is reported to have an attachment already, which would be a bar to your views and wishes, if true."

"Reports are generally false, and I shall give them no credit. I shall go and look her up, and come to the point at once—no beating about the bush for me! I have no time at my age to waste needlessly; I merely want yea or nay. I like her, and think she would grace my table, and make me very happy. I have a name and position; she has beauty, which, combined with wealth, will make her the envy of many. That's the order of my campaign, and these are the reasons that brought me here to-day."

"I can only wish you success," Bertram said, as he muttered, "Why, he's mad—in his dotage—a fit inmate for Blackwell's, to talk about marrying Melly, my wife! What on earth I should do, is more than I can ever think. I must do something; she will have to keep our secret and play a parol!"

"When do you propose calling, sir?" Bertram exclaimed.

"Why, to-morrow, of course; while I am in the humor. There's nothing like knowing your fate. No suspense for me!"

Bertram soon took his leave, and returned with all haste to his home, where he found his wife dressed ready to attend a ball with a party of friends.

"How ill-tempered you do look, Bertram!" said his wife, inaudibly to the rest of the company.

"Enough to make me, when I find myself standing on the brink of a precipice."

"I don't comprehend," she returned.

"Perhaps it would be better, then, if you were to retire, and permit me to explain," he answered, somewhat bitterly, as he looked around the apartment, and saw the votaries of fashion lounging about listlessly, while waiting for his wife.

Excusing herself for a few minutes, she followed her husband to her boudoir, where he told her the strange events that had occurred.

"You need have no fear," she said, merrily, as a few minutes afterward they returned to their friends; "I will play my cards in such a manner that even you will admire my diplomacy."

"Yes, I can thoroughly understand you are a mistress in the art of deceit," he thought; but said aloud, "I can trust you, Melly, for you are a clever little woman."

The next day Mr. Dinton presented himself at the mansion.

After sending up his card he had time to take notice of the surroundings.

"Dear me!" he thought; "she's wealthier than I imagined."

As he entered the room he was struck with admiration on seeing Meliora come toward him, holding out her jeweled fingers to welcome him.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure," she said; "and I am more than pleased to see you, Mr. Dinton."

She looked bewilderingly handsome in a magnificent ruby velvet dress, which fitted her to perfection, and gave a rich tone to her warm, brunette complexion. Costly diamonds glistened on her fingers, and a priceless brooch fastened the lace ruffles at her throat.

"Shall I ever have courage to make an offer to such a magnificent creature?" he thought. "It is one thing to plan a campaign of this kind, but another to carry it out. I wish I was twenty years younger; I might have a little more courage."

"Have you been long in town?" she asked, sweetly.

"No; I only arrived yesterday," he replied, rather nervously.

"Then it was very kind to call upon me so soon, my lord,"—this archly. "I doubt not, though, you will soon tire of our close, gloomy

atmosphere, and hasten back to your dear, delightful mountains."

"No place could be gloomy where one so bright existed," he ventured to remark, gallantly. "Dinton Hall has never been the same place since you left, dear Mrs. Everest."

("This is getting awkward," she thought. "I do believe the old gentleman is going to propose to me! What a situation for a niece-in-law to be placed in! I must temporize.")

"It is very kind of you to think so highly of me; but then you place too great a value on poor me."

"That would be impossible! Do you know I have come to tell you that I missed you, and wish you to return as Mrs. Dinton?"

("What have I lost by my precipitancy? What answer can I give? Oh, that I were free to accept such an offer!")

"You take me by surprise, my dear sir," she returned; and had I known this before, my reply might have been different."

"Dear Mrs. Everest, that in point of years I am hardly a suitable match, I admit; but to be frank with you, I wish to teach my nephews a lesson. This may appear a poor compliment to you, but when I tell you that I admired you from the first, and now that I am resolved to marry I come to you and ask you to be my wife, you will see I have no wish to offend your sensibilities."

She inclined her head, to intimate that he had not offended her by his plain speaking. Besides she was anxious to learn the nature of the threatened lesson, especially on Bertram's account.

"You are very good," he said, "to listen so patiently to a garrulous old fellow like me. My nephews are becoming unmanageable; one has married against my wishes, and even Bertram half refuses to pay his addresses to Miss Clevedon, whom I wish him to marry out of hand."

She nearly laughed in his face at the little comedy he had so cleverly planned, and which he thought could be played with her help, of all women in the world.

"Mr. Dinton, I think you will find it difficult to induce Mr. Bertram Wyncott to marry."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because when at Dinton Hall he opened his mind to me on the subject; and from what I then gathered, he is almost a woman-hater. He saw how his brother Oswald had estranged your affections by falling in love, and has taken the lesson to heart, I am afraid."

"But the case is very different, my dear madam. I am in favor of his marrying somebody, if not Miss Clevedon. I hope he has not been forgetful in paying his respects to you."

"Oh, no! I see him frequently."

This with a lurking smile in her eyes.

"Jove!" soliloquized his uncle; "this may account for the young dog's aversion to marriage. The charming widow has, perhaps, rejected him."

Aloud he remarked:

"Might I beg of you to influence Bertram to accede to my wishes? You, I am sure, could succeed where I should fail."

"You overrate the power of my persuasive charms; but I will do my best, though I am still of opinion that he is a misogynist."

"I am content to abide the issue. But what answer am I to have from your sweet lips, fairest and most bewitching of your sex?"

This as he rose, and took her hand and raised it to his lips, with the courtly grace of a gallant of the old school.

"What shall I do to end this farce?" she thought. "If Bertram becomes aware of this, he may spoil all by confessing everything."

Some day the mask would drop from her face, and men would know her for what she was; but at present she was too much of a diplomatist to show her hand.

"Alas! I can hold out no hopes, Mr. Dinton. Pray do not press me for a reason for having to decline the honor you propose."

Bending over her hand, he said:

"Pardon my temerity, dear madam, and accept my thanks for your frankness. I shall not admire you the less because I have been unsuccessful."

He took his leave, much to her relief, and she hastened to join her husband, whom she found closeted with Mr. Caddle, and whose face was pale, as if from suppressed passion.

He had just signed a document, which the lawyer was carefully blotting, with a self-satisfied smile and a side-glance of triumph at the haughty woman who now entered the room.

"What new folly is this, Bertram?" she asked. "I am sure you have been induced by that man to do something you will regret."

"Madam, I thank you for your good opinion of me. 'That man,' as you term me, has found the money to keep your expensive establishment going. Let me beg of you to control your temper, as to vent it upon me might be ruinous."

"Bertram, do you permit this fellow to insult me in my own house?" she asked, trembling with passion.

"For Heaven's sake, be calm, Melly! We have placed ourselves in Mr. Caddle's power, and must not take umbrage at his plain speaking."

"You may have placed yourself in his power, but I am at liberty to speak—and I shall!"

Turning to the money-lender, for he was that and nothing else, she said, with an imperious gesture:

"Leave this house, or my menials shall eject you! And in future, Bertram, let your business be transacted elsewhere, for I shall not permit this man to enter my house again!"

"You need not turn me out, Mrs. Wyncott, because Mr. Dinton might be at your door, and learn a few secrets which would imperil your prospects. I shall go quietly; but remember, I may have the power some day to retaliate; and when I do, I shall not forget your treatment of me to-day!"

Taking up the papers that Bertram had just signed, he made a profound obeisance to Mrs. Wyncott, and said, with a covert sneer:

"Good-day, madam! When next we meet, you may treat me more civilly. Let me give you one word of advice. Never quarrel with your legal adviser, for he usually holds dangerous secrets."

When he left, she turned to her husband, and said:

"In marrying you, Bertram Wyncott, I did a very foolish act."

"Why, what's in the wind now, Melly?"—as he threw himself upon a lounge, with a look of vexation on his Mephistophelian face.

"Because I need not have embarrassed myself by marrying the future heir to the Dinton property."

"I am in no humor to listen to jests," he said, bitterly. "Pray come to the point. I suppose my uncle has been saying something that has upset you!"

"Oh, dear, no; quite the reverse!" she replied, with quiet raillery in her tones. "He was everything that was nice! Pray when are you going to propose to the lovely Miss Clevedon?"

"For Heaven's sake, stop this banter," he said, almost savagely. "I wish the old fellow had never left his dingy home to come up here and torment me. Does he suspect anything?"

"Oh, dear, no! What do you think he said to me?"

"Something puerile, if gallant. He is famous for paying vapid compliments,"—this with a sneer.

"He is simply charming!" she remarked, with a provoking laugh. "It is a distinctive trait in the family, eh?"

"I think I shall go to the club, for I am in no humor to stand much more of this inane nonsense."

"Nonsense, indeed! Let me tell you that

but for you I could be mistress of Dinton Hall."

"Then he carried out his intention! What an egregious old dotard, to make love to my wife!" he thought. "It was a mercy he chose her, though, for had he proposed to a woman that was free, good-by to my chance of ever coming into the property—though what good it will be to me if he persists in living many more years I fail to see; for every year I become more hopelessly involved, and the future owner of Dinton Hall bids fair to become the tenant of some tenement in the region of Five Points, and the daily customer of one of those shady restaurants which abound in that salubrious neighborhood!—What answer did you give my worthy uncle, Mrs. Wyncott?"

"What answer could I give?"

"That is what I desire to know," he returned, reddening with anger.

"I told him it was impossible, that was all. You surely never thought I was mad enough to tell him the truth?"

"I really cannot say what I thought," he said, somewhat relieved. "You women are so headstrong and precipitate, that nothing would surprise me."

"Certainly your opinion of us is not very flattering," she returned, with a curl of the lip, "especially to me; for I could scarcely have secured a colossal fortune unless I had been gifted with tact and a clear brain."

"I wish to Heaven you would extricate us from our difficulties by sparing some of that 'colossal fortune' which you are forever talking about. I have nothing but my paltry allowance to exist upon, sufficient only to keep me decently in apartments, and by no means enough to support a lady of your expensive tastes. I am in the hands of money-lenders, and you know it."

"Did you marry me for my fortune, Bertram Wyncott?"

"If I did, I made a great mistake, as you will admit. Come, act sensibly; we must sink or swim together."

"Not at all. I mean to swim, whoever sinks."

"A wifely sentiment, is it not?" he said, with a sneer. "Surely the match you have made ought to be worth spending money for—on *your* side I mean, my dear, not on mine."

The discussion was getting very bitter, and must have ended in a serious quarrel, when, luckily, General Pringle was announced.

In a moment the pair resumed their society smiles; Mrs. Wyncott, as the fascinating widow, received the general with blandishments, and played the part of hostess to perfection, while Bertram as readily dropped the position of master and assumed that of visitor.

After the footman ushered General Pringle into the drawing-room, he placed his finger significantly to his nose, and muttered: "Another swell to see Mrs. Everest; I shall lose my karacter if I stay here much longer; there's too much of the variety line of business about all this to please a highly respectable gentleman's gentleman like me, as has been brought up full of virtue that shines in my countenance. I must see the butler, and talk to him over a glass of Madeira."

Meanwhile, General Pringle had taken his place near the supposed widow, and was entertaining her with a history of his recent tour.

Turning to Bertram, he said: "By the way, how is your uncle? I think of running out to the Hall soon."

"He is in town, and as Mrs. Everest will tell you, paid her a visit not an hour ago."

"Indeed! Where is he staying?"

"At the Hudson Hotel."

Bertram could now have bitten his tongue with vexation, for his wife's eyes told him he had been guilty of great imprudence.

She hastened, however, to avert the mischief she saw might happen through the general bringing Oswald and his uncle face to face, by saying:

"I am afraid, dear general, that you will

not find him at the hotel. He told me he was leaving for home to-night."

"I am sorry for that," said General Pringle, "for I long to get him to meet Oswald, and the present was a capital opportunity. By the way, Bertram, I was glad to learn you called upon your brother and his dear little wife—Heaven bless them!"

"Yes, we are still friendly; indeed, no one regrets what has happened more than I!"

"Mr. Wyncott has often spoken to me of his brother most affectionately. I am sure he has no sincerer friend than him, except yourself, general."

The general's eyes happened to fall upon a mirror, and he saw a glance pass between the pair which aroused his suspicions that their relationship was somewhat closer than that of mere friends.

After a little further conversation he took his leave, more resolved than ever to gain Mr. Dinton's consent to a project he had conceived, and thereby unravel the mystery which he was sure existed in the lives of Bertram and Mrs. Everest.

"I detest the part of spy," he murmured, as he strolled toward the "St. Denis," "and have no relish for retailing scandal in any shape, but my love for dear Oswald entitles me to take his part. The boy has been cruelly treated by Bertram, and my old friend Dinton has not the sense to see through it all. I loved the lad's mother, and although she refused me, yet I feel all the affection of a parent for him, and no woman has been able to fill her place in my heart."

He took the earliest opportunity of traveling out to Dinton Hall, anxious to commence his task of opening the eyes of his old friend.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NOVEL EXPERIMENT.

MR. DINTON was closeted with General Pringle, who was persuading him to adopt a rather novel plan by which to discover the truth about his nephews.

"I would stake my life," said Mr. Dinton, "that Bertram is leading a very quiet, studious life up in town, to fit himself for a judge on the bench."

"It will do no harm, at least, Dinton. You have cut Oswald out of your will, and cannot think that anything but affection would induce him to mourn over your supposed death. The experiment is worth trying. As it is, you are racked by doubts and suspicions that would soon be laid at rest. Do consent, and leave me to carry out the project."

"But the servants will suspect something, and if I move about, I might be shot at for a ghost."

"Nonsense!" was the laughing reply. "We had better take Denning into our confidence. He is a trusty fellow, and can manage to keep the servants' curiosity within bounds."

"But couldn't I be prosecuted for gaining information under false pretenses?"

"False fiddlesticks! Certainly not! What do you say Dinton—yes or no?"

"Yes; but mind, I've booked your bet, and if I win will not let you off."

"I shall be satisfied if I lose. Now, lay yourself up at once, and to-morrow our old friend, Doctor Williams, will physic you."

"I'll be hanged if he does, Pringle; that's not in the compact, you know."

All the necessary arrangements were completed, and after a brief illness the patient was reported to have died, the announcement being received with universal regret.

Bertram and Oswald were apprised of the melancholy circumstance, and asked to return to the Hall as quickly as possible.

When the news reached the Avenue, it caused anything but grief.

"Melly, we are saved, my love!—not by your colossal fortune, but by my uncle's very timely demise. I am sorry now that I made over Dinton Hall to that shark of a Caddle; but there! I never cared particularly about the place, it is so dull."

"Perhaps he has made another will, my darling?"—this with a warm embrace, which he had been a stranger to for many a month.

"I know he has not, for I have the chief clerk of our family solicitors in my pay. No; I am all right, and Oswald is all wrong!"

Oswald and his wife received the sad news with deep grief—he especially, for he loved his uncle unselfishly.

"Come, come, what means this unseemly noise at such a time as this? Where are your feelings for our poor dead master?" exclaimed Denning, the butler, to a group of clamoring servants, both male and female, who wished to see the remains of their late master.

"Do you think," said the cook, defiantly, as she placed her arms akimbo, "that I am nobody in this 'stablishment, when I have cooked for the dear master for nigh up five-and-twenty-years?—while you, fine gent as you may think yourself, are only a fresh importation, and have no right to dictate to the likes of us!"

Taking courage from the cook's example, they opened upon the unfortunate butler in chorus, who stood it all very patiently.

"Indeed, I am not to blame. I should advise you all to have patience, and speak to the master's lawyer, who will be here, I hope, to-day."

At this juncture a lady entered with slow, majestic step, attired in dull, dead black silk, which rustled and switched at every step she took, and made a peculiar accompaniment to the large bag of keys which hung from her side.

"Good-day, Mr. Denning," she said, in a dignified tone. "I wish to know by whose authority I am kept from the apartment where my late master lies? I am perfectly sure it can be no wish of his, as I was one of his most faithful servants and friend,"—this with a stifled sob which would not be subdued.

Wiping her eyes with a fine, snowy handkerchief, she added, summoning all her courage and wonted dignity, "I should have thought that I, as lady housekeeper in this establishment, would have had the ordering of affairs at this sad time, and not the butler, who has been but two years in the house."

"Dear madam," he interrupted, "every word you say gives me pain, for indeed I have not sought this unpleasant position. I am only acting under commands, and those of a most stringent kind."

"Well, well, I suppose it is not your fault, after all; but of course you can understand my feelings as an old confidential servant of our dear late master."

"Madam, say no more; but hold me guiltless of any cause of offense, I beg," he said, respectfully.

He held out his hand, which was clasped warmly by Mrs. Warner, as she said, smiling through her tears:

"I am afraid I have not been too polite to you, and that, after all, I was wrong. Will you pardon my impatient words, and say no more about it? I am sure you are only doing your duty, and I have been too impetuous and unjust."

"Here comes the general," said Denning, looking through the window. "Now, he will be the gentleman to speak to. What!—going?" as, led by the cook, whose courage oozed out of her finger-ends, they filed out of the room in hot haste, not caring to stay and face such a stickler for obedience as the gallant officer who now came upon the scene.

"Good-day, Mrs. Warner. I have just heard from Mr. Oswald, who, with his wife, will arrive to-morrow. I know you will do all in your power to make them comfortable."

"That I will, general. I hope our dear master has not forgotten him. He is the best of the two nephews—pardon the liberty I am taking in speaking so plainly, but lookers-on see most of the game; and mark my words, when Mr. Bertram comes, he will bring that fine lady with him as his wife."

"What lady do you mean?"

"Mrs. Everest. They were billing and cooing all over the place, and throwing dust in the eyes of the master. I shall certainly not stay if she is to be the future mistress, for she began to treat every one like dirt before she left."

The general took her hand and shook it warmly, saying, "Mr. Oswald has a true friend in you, I see; and I am heartily glad, for the poor lad sadly needs friends."

At this juncture the sound of carriage wheels attracted their attention, and Mrs. Warner excused herself, and left.

"Hilloa! who can this be?" the general thought, as a portly individual alighted, followed by a man in greasy black clothes and a napless hat, blue bag in hand. "Some lawyer from Bertram, probably. If he doesn't show up in his true colors, then I am a Dutchman!"

"Mr. Caddle, general, is awaiting you in the library," said Denning.

"What's his business with me, I should like to know?"

Before Denning could reply, Caddle and his factotum walked into the apartment.

"Take a note of everything, Scroggs. I'll order the butler to give you something to eat presently; we have stole a march upon Mr. Bertram."

Having surveyed the room and its contents, he condescended to notice the general and Denning, by bestowing a supercilious nod upon them.

"Did you wish to see me, sir?" asked the general, quietly, but in an unmistakable tone of authority that enforced attention.

"Beg pardon—presume you are General Pringle. I am Mr. Caddle, sir, of the firm of Caddle and Squashem, lawyers of the new owner of the Hall."

"What new owner do you mean?" said the general, forgetting for the moment that he was playing a part.

"Why, Mr. Bertram Wyncott, my client and friend, who with his wife is coming here; but not to take possession. I am here for that purpose."

"Just as I suspected," the general thought. "This is glorious! I'll give them rope enough! A wife, eh! and debts to any amount, I dare say! This is virtuous Bertram!"

"What service can I render you?" he said, aloud.

"I want rooms for myself and man."

"There is a capital hotel not far off," said the general.

"Hotel, sir!—hotel! Do you know, sir, that—"

"You will not be accommodated here, certainly. It is hardly the time for anybody to expect, a stranger especially, to remain in a house of mourning. Delicacy ought to have some place in the heart even of a representative of Caddle and Squashem!"

"Confound it, sir! you don't seem to know that the whole place belongs to me—furniture, carriages, horses, stables, pigsties, hen-houses, and all; and yet you say I cannot stay in my own house! Bosh! fiddle-de-dee! Scroggs is in possession for me; and here, sir, is my authority!"—handing the general a voluminous document.

"This is a very sad business," replied the general; "my old friend would rise from the dead if he knew that his old home was to pass into the hands of strangers."

"I like this place," said Caddle, with all the airs of proprietorship; "will settle down, and be happy ever after."

"Denning," said the general, in a sad tone, "you will be good enough to attend to the wants of Mr. Caddle and his servant."

Turning to the lawyer, he said:

"Sir, might I beg the favor of your being silent upon this painful subject until after the funeral?"

"You'll always find me a gentleman, sir; I shall not intrude legal business unless compelled to do so."

"Gentleman!" thought Denning; "you and

Mr. Bertram are pretty specimens—birds of a feather, I am thinking!"

Then the general and lawyer had quitted the room.

CHAPTER IX.

AND LAST.

It was a glorious autumnal morning, and the woods were painted in golden hues; birds sung in the branches, and the cattle browsed in the meadows, making as pretty a picture as the eye could enjoy.

The domestics of the Hall were on tiptoe of expectation; a telegram had been received announcing the speedy arrival of the new master and his retinue, and giving orders for their accommodation.

"Really, Mr. Denning," said the housekeeper, "I wonder at Mr. Bertram's thoughtlessness, not to call it by a harsher term. Everything will be upset, and the house turned into a hotel. It's not paying even the commonest respect to the memory of the benefactor."

"It is deplorable; but we must be patient, Mrs. Warner. I shall be much mistaken if he does not have punishment meted out to him. It would never do to express our dislike openly, or the servants would become mutinous and insubordinate. Here they come! Now for worry and trouble; but we have this consolation—it can't last forever."

Bertram and his wife dashed along the noble avenue in their carriage in grand style, followed by their luggage and a retinue of domestics.

"Melly, my love," he said, "allow me to welcome you to our future home, and congratulate you upon your accession."

"It will not suffer in my hands, Bertram; but"—this in a tone of alarm—"there's Mr. Caddle with some horrid man! We must get rid of them at once."

"Ah, yes, my love; I'll attend to that."

He led her through the line of bowing servants up the grand staircase; she disdainful and haughty, he absorbed in unpleasant reflections respecting Caddle's motives, especially as he knew the Hall and its contents had been assigned to him.

The general received them in the drawing-room, and said:

"I am sorry we meet under such sad and mournful circumstances."

"Oh, it is but a common debt of nature which we must all pay sooner or later," said Mrs. Wyncott. "What concerns us most now is the speedy settlement of business and the arrangements for our comfort. The old servants must make room for mine, who are to conduct everything under the new regime."

"You perceive, general, what a splendid woman of business my wife is?"

"I need not to be told of that, Bertram, although I must confess that I am somewhat surprised to find you are married."

"Ah, yes, we managed it very cleverly, you know. Pity Oswald made such a mess of it."

"Of course you will do something for him?" said the general.

"Certainly not!" she replied. "We live in style, and they must shift for themselves. I hope we shall not be bored by them; there will certainly be no room for all of us!"

"You are mistress here for the present," said the general, with a courtly bow, but with a swift glance of contempt; "to-morrow the will is to be opened."

"I am sole heir, I know; trust me for knowing that. The deeds and money are in a safe; have you the keys?"

"Yes; and with your kind permission, will retain them till to-morrow."

"Where is my uncle laid?" said Bertram.

"In yonder room."

"My dear Bertram, you will not be mad enough to expose yourself to the risk of contagion—I forbid it!"

"It does not matter, my lady, as by the doctor's orders he has been screwed down," said the general, with open contempt.

A sigh of relief escaped Bertram at this an-

nouncement, as death in any form was distasteful to him.

Caddle entered the room and extended his hand to Bertram, who, however, did not choose to see it.

"You have lost no time, Caddle. I will see you presently."

"This is a family council, at which you are not wanted," his wife said, haughtily.

"Very well, madame; but I suspect I shall be very much wanted presently. Your husband will tell you who is master here."

Having sent this shaft home, he bowed himself out.

"Insolent fellow!" she remarked. "I wonder, Bertram, you submit to his liberties. I shall now retire, and join you at luncheon later on; but let it be laid as far away as possible from here, and, Bertram—"

"Yes, my sweet love!"

"Give instructions for this apartment to be fumigated; it is getting unpleasant already." Saying which, she swept out of the room majestically.

"Ta, ta, general, we shall meet you at lunch," said Bertram.

"I expect your brother and his wife. They may be here at any moment."

"The housekeeper will attend to them. My wife does not care to associate with Mrs. Oswald Wyncott."

"Heartless, shameless fellow!" muttered the general. "Your time of retribution is near at hand! You little know that all you and your fine lady wife have said has been heard by the supposed dead man! Ah, here comes Oswald and his pretty little wife, God bless them!"

They entered with every expression of genuine grief depicted on their faces, and were greeted affectionately by their old friend.

"This is a sad blow," remarked the general.

"And a very bitter and sharp one," Oswald replied. "I would give worlds to have been reconciled to him, for I loved him as a father, and only disobeyed him because my happiness and Jessie's was at stake."

"Your brother and his wife are here."

"Married!" he said, in astonishment. "To whom?"

"Mrs. Everest."

"Thank Heaven that poor uncle did not know of this; he felt my act of disobedience so keenly, and might have visited it heavily on Bertram, who is not fitted to cope with adversity. His future is secure, I know, nor do I envy him his good fortune."

Denning announced luncheon, and requested the general's attendance.

"Give my compliments to Mr. Wyncott, and say that I shall lunch alone with Mr. Oswald and his wife."

"We do not intend to intrude," Oswald said; "and after we have taken a last look at dear old uncle, shall go to Mr. Paget's."

"Even that last consolation is denied you, Oswald, for he is fastened down forever."

"My brother will not refuse me one favor, I hope, in letting me have uncle's portrait; I ask for nothing more—he may take everything else."

"We will talk of that presently; but Mrs. Wyncott must wish to be shown to her apartments after her long journey."

He rung for the housekeeper, and said, "Mrs. Warner, will you kindly conduct Mrs. Wyncott to her rooms?"

She hesitated, and looked confused, and said, at last, "I regret exceedingly that Mrs. Bertram and her suite have occupied every room in the house, even to mine."

"Oh, it's of no consequence, my dear general," Jessie hastened to say, with a sweet smile that quite won upon Mrs. Warner, who thought her an angel, and contrasted her simple, ladylike style with the grandiose manner of her sister-in-law.

"Mrs. Warner, my rooms are at this lady's disposal; will you attend her?" said the general.

After luncheon Mrs. Bertram Wyncott sailed into the drawing-room, not having once inquired about Jessie, who might as well have been a nonentity so far as she was concerned.

On one of the occasional-tables lay a magnificent card-case, studded with jewels, an heirloom of the family.

She took it up and examined it admiringly, little dreaming that Scroggs had his "eye" upon her, as he termed it, and was quitting the room with it, when, barring her way, he said, violently:

"No, you don't, marm! That's my master's property, and I am the man in possession."

"Fellow, how dare you?" accompanying the words with a smart blow from her hand that made his ears tingle.

Caddle entered at this moment, and she turned angrily upon him, saying:

"Have you dared to put this low fellow in my drawing-room to be a spy upon me?"

"Nathan, you can retire for the present," said the lawyer. "I will put the blow down in the bill of costs, for your benefit."

"You will, will you, you low money-lender! Leave my house this instant, or I will order my servants to put you out!"

"Put me out!" he gasped. "Madam, I would have you know that I represent the majesty of the law, and that every stick and stone about this mansion is mine, as sure as my name is Josiah, of the firm of Caddle & Squashem."

"Ah, this is too much," she cried, fanning herself violently, as she paced the room. "Is a lady of my position to be insulted? My husband will talk to you, fellow, and chastise your insolence!"

"Talk away, madam. Perhaps you are not aware that I know all about you and your antecedents?"

"My what, fellow?"

"Your an-te-ce-dents! You were the widow of a bankrupt soap boiler, madam, and reveled in the not very aristocratic name of Brobbs."

"I shall faint," she cried, tottering toward a chair. "You false-speaking, abominable man. I a Brobbs! I shall go mad! Ring for my maid, you detestable wretch!"

He took no heed of her heroics, but quitted the room, with a triumphant grin on his rugged visage, which did not help restore her equanimity.

She literally shrieked with passion, which brought Jessie to her side, who inquired if she could be of service to her in any way.

"Give me my smelling-bottle," she said, haughtily, "and admit some fresh air. I believe that you and your husband have put that low lawyer up to insult me."

"Madam, do I hear aright? My husband is incapable of such conduct as you have imputed to him. Surely a common misfortune ought to unite us in a closer bond of sympathy. No one regrets more than myself that an insult should have been put upon you at such a time."

"Why did you come? You are not in the will, and can feel no interest in my late uncle-in-law's affairs."

"I will leave you now to pay respect to the memory of one whom my husband loved as a father. Perhaps you will feel sorry for having spoken harshly to me."

"The hypocrite!" murmured the other. "I'll put her in her place! I want no pauper relatives here. Bertram shall tell them this plainly; and as for that fellow Caddle, he shall be horsewhipped, if I do it myself. Brobbs, indeed! I wonder where the fellow got his information from. But no matter; I am Mrs. Bertram Wyncott now, in spite of them all."

Night had cast its sable mantle over the earth and shrouded everything in darkness, while the wind whistled shrilly through the branches, and the moon was hidden by heavy banks of clouds, the harbingers of a storm.

The lamps had been lit at the Hall, and most of the inmates had retired to rest when Caddle, flushed with wine and a feeling of proprietorship, went in search of Bertram, and, missing

his way, found himself in a disused wing of the mansion.

Perceiving a light streaming from under a door, he opened it and entered, and found himself in the presence of an old gentleman, who looked up inquiringly, as he said:

"What is your business, sir, and who are you?"

"I am Mr. Caddle, sir, the master of this house and its contents."

"The deuce you are!"

"Do you doubt my word, sir? Here is my authority," producing the document he had shown the general. "And now let me ask who you are?"

"The secretary. Pray be seated."

"You are just the man I want to see; I can put a few dollars in your pocket if you answer my questions. Do you think this property is worth fifty thousand as it stands?"

"I would give seventy thousand for it myself, for the matter of that. You have got a bargain, Mr. Caddle. But are you quite sure it is yours? 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip,' you know."

"Ah, ah!—very good! I am safe enough, let me tell you; I have only to obtain a magistrate's signature as a matter of form, and give up certain bills to the new master, and the thing is done. You must have netted a tidy sum from the old buffer; if so (and I know all secretaries do it), I can find you investments that would bring you in fifty per cent. That's good enough, isn't it?"

"Too good for me; I am afraid I have been too honest—what you might term an honest secretary, in fact."

"That sort of thing never pays, my boy. Where would I be if I had practiced it. Not the possessor of a fine property that was carefully nursed by the old party who's turned up his toes!"

"It was foolish of him now, wasn't it, Mr. Caddle?"

"Foolish isn't the word for it. I call it idiotic, with an extravagant nephew, like my friend Bertram, who humbugged him up to his very eyes. By jingo! it's awfully funny to think he should have disinherited one nephew for marrying, when the t'other did the same, and lived up to the tune of twenty thousand a year in New York, without the stupid old owl of an uncle knowing a word about it!"

"Very funny, wasn't it? But I suppose it will all come right in the end."

"That's his business. I have made my innings, and don't care a jot for anything else. But you seem honest, and I rather like you, so you may consider yourself re-engaged. Good-night. If you should happen to see Mr. Bertram, tell him that his friend Caddle wants him."

When the fellow had gone, the old man placed his head on his hands and groaned aloud in anguish of spirit.

"I might have died in reality, and gone to my account with a great wrong on my soul to Oswald. Pringle was right; the unearthing of this nest of villains has cost me many a sharp pang, but it has saved much future misery. I could forgive Bertram all but parting with the old homestead. He has married an adventuress, I have no doubt. Heaven has punished me for my unjustness to so sweet a girl as Miss Paget."

He sat for many hours pondering deeply over the responsibilities which his discoveries had thrown upon him; and had any of the inmates, save the general, seen his face, worn and wam with grief, they would have taken him for an apparition.

The following morning the library was the scene of an interesting event—namely, the reading of the will by General Pringle.

Oswald and his wife were there, as were, of course, Bertram and his.

After leaving legacies to his servants, and making a few other trifling bequests, his whole estate, both real and personal, was settled upon Bertram and his heirs forever.

Oswald was told he was forgiven, but that he could not be trusted with property to use in aiding his father-in-law's chimerical schemes.

"I hand in my claim now," said Caddle, bustling to the front with Scroggs at his heels, like a terrier following a bulldog; "it's signed, sealed, and delivered! I stand here the proud possessor of Dinton Hall!"

"Bertram, is this true?" asked General Pringle. "Have you parted with your inheritance?"

He turned on his heel haughtily, and vouchsafed no reply.

"Bertram, there's my hand," said Oswald. "You have my best wishes for your future, which I hope will be bright and happy. Heaven has blessed me with health and strength to work for a livelihood; I will strain every nerve to get back this dear old home of our childhood, should you fail to do so!"

At this juncture a servant entered with a letter on a salver for Oswald, who, excusing himself, opened and read it, when his face became suffused with joy.

Turning to Jessie, he kissed her tenderly, and said: "My darling, this is good news! The seam of coal has been found at last, and our father will be as wealthy a man as any in the country!"

Congratulations poured in upon the fortunate pair; but every tongue was hushed, every eye bent upon a figure that emerged from the chamber of death.

"Do not be alarmed, my friends," said the well-known voice of Mr. Dinton, "and forgive me for having practiced deceit upon you."

"Why, it's the secretary!" said Caddle. "One would think he had risen from the dead!"

"So I have," was the smiling reply; "just in time to save Dinton Hall from falling into the hands of a sharp, money-lending lawyer! If it's any satisfaction to you, sir, know that I am the owner of this place and all its contents."

"Then I have lost my money, for I have put Bertram Wyncott's bill into the fire. What am I to do?"

"Relieve us of your presence," said General Pringle, dryly. "It's only an exemplification of the old moral—the biter bit."

Caddle rushed from the room, followed by Nathan Scroggs, who received a parting kick from Denning which sent him atop of his master, and both rolled down the stairs ingloriously.

"I shall not humiliate you, Bertram, by alluding to the past in the presence of this company, except to say that I hope you will take the lesson deeply to heart and profit by it, and that in the long life which I hope is before you your wife will prove a fitting helpmate."

Turning to Oswald, he pressed him to his heart and said, with tears in his voice: "My darling boy, I crave your forgiveness, and that of your gentle wife. You will not desert me as I did you?"

"Never, dear uncle; nor must we be hard upon Bertram, or we shall be committing the same grave fault over again."

"All this happiness is owing to you, dear old friend," said Mr. Dinton, grasping the general's hand. "How can we ever repay you?"

"By forgiving and forgetting. I have obtained an appointment abroad for Bertram, where I hope his talents will raise him to a high position."

This was heaping coals of fire upon the head of the man and woman who, in their day of seeming triumph, had forgotten those who had just claims upon them.

Bertram Wyncott and his wife were seated together in one of the rooms of the suite that had been allotted to them, both looking pale and haggard after the severe defeat they had sustained owing to the success of the novel experiment.

"If you are a man," said his wife, with a look of contempt at him, "you would shoot General Pringle as you would a mad dog!"

"And get hanged for my pains! No, no, Melly! I don't mind doing things that will not place me within the pale of the law. I have a better project in view."

"And what might that be, pray?" she asked, with a sneer. "Hitherto you have done nothing but raise money at ruinous interest."

"Which I shall never repay. Caddle has destroyed my bills, and I do not owe him a cent."

"You cannot take the credit for that," she said. "I was a fool to mate with such as you; but I suppose we must make the best of it."

"You are very insulting!" he said. "Why not come to the rescue yourself now, instead of taunting me? Your fortune can save us, and put everything straight. I, as your husband, have a right to expect this much."

"I must be frank with you," she said. "You heard what General Pringle said to Caddle. Yours is a similar case—the biter bit."

"For goodness' sake, Melly, do be serious! This is no time for jesting. Do you mean to say that in marrying you I wedded a penniless—"

"Beggar, I suppose you mean! Don't mince your words, Bertram Wyncott. Although not quite so bad as that, I had no fortune of any kind, but only sufficient money to enable me to carry on my campaign, which ended so ingloriously for me in marrying you."

"You're as frank as your manners are charming, madam. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me how we are to live in any sort of style in the future? Perhaps your arts can suggest a way out of the difficulty?"

"I see but one way," she replied, "and that is to go to your uncle and plead for his entire forgiveness."

"You do not know all, or you would not advise me to take such a step."

"It cannot make matters worse," she replied. "What mystery is this?"

"Simply that to provide me with funds to marry you, I committed what they term a forgery, besides appropriating—which is a genteel way of putting it—money from my uncle's safe and throwing the blame upon my brother."

"What! have I descended so low as to be the wife of a criminal?"

The guilty man hid his face in his hands, while she continued to reproach him bitterly, apparently feeling no mercy or compunction for him, although he had been a weak tool in her hands.

Raising his head, he said, bitterly: "I did not give you credit for much feeling; but I find you are as heartless as if you were stone."

"What you dare not do I shall. Mr. Dinton has a high opinion of me, or he would not have done me the honor of selecting me as his future wife. Be a man, and don't sink under your troubles. You have an appointment offered to you abroad; accept it. Although I have deceived you with regard to my fortune, I have talents, and will use them for your benefit and my own."

She swept out of the room more like an empress going to give audience to her ministers than a woman about to plead for forgiveness at the hands of a man she had deceived.

Even her audacity failed her at the last moment when she remembered how insultingly she had spoken of Mr. Dinton when she thought he lay dead.

She knocked timidly at the library door, and entered at his bidding.

"To what am I indebted for this visit, Mrs. Wyncott?"—rising and placing a chair. "By the way, I have omitted to congratulate you upon your marriage. Allow me to do so now."

"Oh, my dear Mr. Dinton, I have come as a suppliant for mercy. Bertram is broken-hearted, and feels his conduct so keenly that he cannot face you. It is better to be frank with you. I have no fortune, and my husband's affairs are so involved that unless he receives pecuniary assistance he cannot take up the ap-

pointment which General Pringle has obtained for him."

"Tell him to give me a list of his debts," said the uncle, coldly, "but let me tell you that his first step toward repentance must be a free and frank apology to his brother, whom he has deeply wronged, and to his wife who has suffered so unjustly through his machinations."

"Are we not humbled sufficiently?"

"There can be no humiliation in doing what is right. If you only knew all—how basely he has acted (not stopping even at crime), you would be the first to influence him to take such a step."

She was silent, for this was the bitterest ingredient in the cup she and her guilty husband had to quaff.

"Not content by false representations and subtle innuendoes to ruin his brother in my estimation, he must needs accuse him of theft and forgery. It will take years before Bertram can re-establish himself in my good opinion. Let him work honestly and he will find in me his best friend. But I will not encourage extravagance, Mrs. Wyncott, and beyond an allowance which I shall make him, he must depend on his own exertions. I regret I am compelled to speak so plainly to a lady whom I had every reason *once* to admire and respect, but it is better to do so, rather than to raise false hopes."

Rising, she said, with an imploring gesture:

"Be merciful to us in this bitter hour of trouble."

"What mercy did you or Bertram show to others when you thought you had gained your inheritance? If I did my duty I should not permit him to remain under my roof, his conduct has been so heartless! Although he owes everything to me, he expressed no sorrow at my supposed death, but has brought disgrace upon a time-honored name by assigning my dear old home and all its cherished contents to a mere money-lender. I could forgive him anything but that. No, madam; if he desires aid in his difficulties he must conform to my wishes. Let Oswald or his wife plead with me, not you, who have sinned quite as deeply as Bertram."

She left the room in silence, crushed by his just rebukes, and sought her husband, whom she found in a state bordering upon frenzy.

Facing her with a gleam of madness in his eyes he asked, hoarsely:

"Well, what message have you for me? Has he ordered us to leave his roof?"

"No, Bertram; but he insists upon your making a full apology to Oswald and his wife."

"Never! There can be only one ending to all this, and that is—death!"

Snatching a revolver from his breast-pocket, he placed the weapon to his temple; but before he could perpetrate the rash deed she sprang forward and wrested it from him, and threw her arms about his neck, exclaiming:

"Dear Bertram, live for both our sakes, and let us try to redeem the past. I have been guilty of deceit and cunning toward you, and am to blame more than you; but I do love you, and will be a good wife to you if you will only trust me."

"God bless you, Melly, for those words! I thought even you had turned against me in my hour of adversity! I will be brave, and will battle with my difficulties, your love and affection to aid me."

She kissed him tenderly, and laying her head upon his breast, sobbed like a child.

Adversity had touched her heart, while prosperity had made her arrogant.

In Oswald and Jessie they found true friends, who gladly pleaded for them, and succeeded in obtaining Mr. Dinton's entire forgiveness.

He only stipulated that they should remain abroad for some time, until the scandal attaching to their proceedings should have blown over.

The coal mine proved exceedingly valuable,

and placed Oswald and Jessie in a position of great affluence.

Many a generous remittance found its way to his brother, who appeared to be quite reformed, but who, owing to the trouble he had passed through, sunk under ill-health, and died comparatively young.

His widow rarely visits them, but whenever she does, she is received with affectionate warmth.

Dinton Hall is full of childish laughter, which floats through every room and along the corridors, making sweet music in the ears of the old man, whose chief delight is to watch the growth of these heaven-sent flowerets.

General Pringle has taken up his abode there, an honored member of the family.

Oswald and Jessie love each other the more deeply as the years roll on, and gain increasing affection and respect from both rich and poor.

Mrs. Clevedon and her daughter have passed out of the lives of the family, who do not regret the circumstance.

Mrs. Warner has exchanged her name for that of Mrs. Denning; and he, in turn, has changed his position of butler for the higher one of secretary.

The cook still flourishes her wand of office—the rolling-pin—in the spacious kitchen, and is a great favorite with Oswald's children, who pay her frequent visits, and never return empty-handed.

Caddle and his man, Nathan Scroggs, still pursue their old calling of squeezing their victims dry, but have never chosen to visit the vicinity of Dinton Hall again.

There is a song which Jessie sings that Mr. Dinton is never tired of hearing.

One line in it has a peculiar significance for him, and he often repeats it—

"Ring out the false, ring in the true."

THE END.

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